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MYSTERY MAGAZINE



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A MAN OF VIOLENCE

A NEW MIKE SHAYNE Short Novel by BRETT HALLIDAY

THE COMIC BOOKS MURDER

An Extraordinary Novelet

by RICHARD O'BRIEN

A COUNTRY LIKE THE SUN

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MIKE SHAYNE



MARCH, 1972
VOL. 30, NO. 4

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

A MAN OF VIOLENCE

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Once she had been loved, desired by many men. Now she had been robbed of her last tarnished possession—her life. "Find the man who killed my sister," the girl told Mike Shayne. "I want him at my feet — dead or alive."

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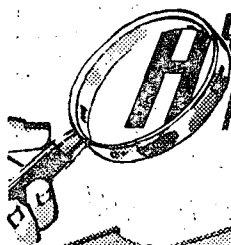
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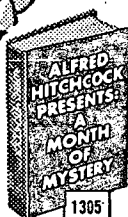
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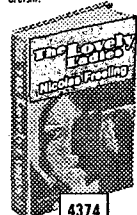
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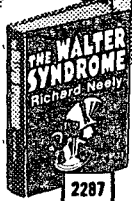
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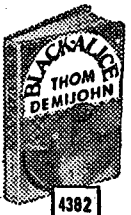
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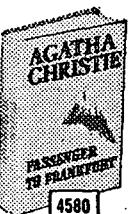
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A MAN OF VIOLENCE

By BRETT HALLIDAY

She had loved life, lived it to the hilt. Now she was naked, defenseless, dead. . . "Find the man who killed my sister," the girl told Mike Shayne. "I want him—now—dead or alive. . ."



THE GUY named Sylvester Hondo was snake-quick. He lashed out with a straight left that traveled like an arrow and landed flush against Mike Shayne's mouth. It might not have worked that well—for he had not expected the attack. The red-haired Miami private detective went back a couple of steps, more surprised than hurt.

Hondo came on fast. He followed with a right hook against Shayne's big ear and smashed another left against the detective's neck. The hook was the damaging blow. Things went fuzzy inside Shayne's head. He

suddenly knew he had a real fight on his hands this time.

Hondo was large, athletic and had gained expertise in boxing rings. He also was an ex-con; he had thrown out the rules a long time ago. He knew how to butt with the top of his head, and he knew how to use his feet.

Shayne caught the toe of a shoe just under the kneecap that hobbled him. But he rallied, and shot a powerful right toward the double image—and missed.

Another blow against the detective's ear sent him down to his knees and he abruptly felt as if he were a palm swaying in a

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**THE NEW
MIKE SHAYNE
SHORT NOVEL**



lazy breeze. He felt himself pitching forward and he struggled against the sensation. This was all going too fast. With an extreme effort, he attempted to get his feet under him.

Hondo brought a dropkick up under his rib cage and Shayne felt the cage lift. New pain splayed out through his body like tiny electric currents. But he was on his feet again. The kick had helped bring him up.

He lashed out blindly. And this time his huge fist smacked against something solid. A *whooshing* sound filled Shayne's ringing ears and he became conscious of Hondo peeling off in a stumbling circle.

Shayne shook his head. Cobwebs disappeared magically, and for a few seconds everything was in focus again. The tepid Tuesday Miami dusk was around him, seeming to bathe him. Salt-tanged air filled his lungs. He was conscious of being on the lush grounds of a posh estate. And Hondo, the foe, was curling away from him in a somewhat erratic arc.

Watching Hondo, Shayne remembered grimly. A rather succulent blonde with a tousled look and manila-colored eyes had been ushered into his office that afternoon by Lucy Hamilton, who had politely stood aside after ushering and not-so-politely eyeballed the prospective new

client. Lucy was hospitable, dubious and envious. The prospective client, who said her name was Jan Farby, was chic, blunt and crying murder.

Hondo was back. He had completed his circle. And he was crouched slightly now, elbows and arms protecting his body, head tucked, eyes dark and angry. But Hondo was no fool either. He kept his cool. He fainted a right cross and the detective reacted reflexively. He ducked. A left fist suddenly became a jackhammer against Shayne's nose. His head bobbed. The blows were irritating, kept Shayne at a distance. Flicks, fighters called them. There was no particular pain from the blows but Shayne realized he was being kept off balance.

Shayne got in a left to Hondo's chest, a right chop to the midsection. It felt as if he was smacking concrete. Hondo kept coming on, moving in. Hondo shot a solid smash against Shayne's forehead and the fuzziness abruptly returned to the detective. He knew he was peeling back. He attempted to stop himself. Something down low, against his calves, tripped him. He flipped over a palmetto and went down hard.

Again his head cleared. It was as if the jar of going down settled everything into its proper place. And for a moment he remem-

bered how Jan Farby had scrawled the check for \$5,000, took the check from a book on her good-looking knee and passed it to him. He saw himself glance briefly at the check, then tuck it inside his coat wallet where it still was snug. The \$5,000 was what had brought him to the estate, pitted him against Hondo. Now all he had to do was whittle the ex-con down to size, ask a few questions and get a few satisfactory answers. . .

A foot came down hard against Shayne's stomach. He grunted and caught an ankle, twisted. Hondo pitched, to sprawl headlong with a yell. Shayne rolled and scrambled. He lunged toward Hondo and saw the foot too late. The shoe heel smashed against the detective's eyes.

Shayne rolled with the new pain and glanced down at his hand. Blood. The eye was clouding again. He knew he had a skin split somewhere on his forehead, but this was no time to bother with it.

Hondo was six feet away, a slightly distorted figure standing spread-legged, breathing hard and looking glassy-eyed. The look surprised the detective. He didn't remember catching Hondo with a solid blow. But Hondo, obviously, was hurt. His knees were loose, the dark eyes held a vacant stare and he had a palm clamped



against his mouth as if he was attempting to hold back some of the blood he was leaking. The blood trickled between his fingers. On the back of the hand was the tattoo of a fly.

Hondo staggered away. Shayne got to his feet.

"Hold it, old buddy!?" The redhead swiped at his blind eye.

But Hondo kept moving, heading toward the mansion, picking up speed with each stride. Shayne went after him. The only trouble was his legs didn't seem to want to function properly. He had trouble moving in a straight line. He stopped at the topdown convertible he had parked in front of the mansion and gripped the side of the car as Hondo went into the house.

Shayne hung on the car and debated. Blood dripped on the side of the convertible. He

growled. He had his senses, but he felt wobbly in the knees and every few seconds dizziness swept him. It had been a helluva fight. Hondo was one tough nut. There were still the questions to ask, of course, but he needed a clear head for that, and the mansion probably was a locked fortress now. He could hammer on doors, rattle windows all night long and not get a peep from inside.

Shayne got into the convertible and rolled down the horseshoe drive to the street. He swiped at the blood film over his eye and shook his head periodically against the dizziness as he attempted to contemplate his next move. The parked car loomed on him suddenly. Briefly he wondered why he was not reacting. Dodging a parked vehicle seemed such a simple undertaking. But not this night.

II

THERE WAS semi-consciousness and a strong smell of anesthetic. People seemed to be flitting around him. Deft fingers probed gently, then soothed. Hushed voices were blurred. The people faded, then returned.

Michael Shayne knew he was in a hospital bed. He had no idea who had put him there, and he really didn't care. It was peaceful. He wallowed in the

peace, not even bothered by the fact he couldn't seem to lift his eyelids. His mind was clear, his memory sharp.

Luch Hamilton had escorted Jan Farby into his office as if she might be escorting a TV star. Lucy was not totally awed, but she acted a bit lofty. And this was a tipoff. It told him that, in Lucy's silent opinion, Jan Farby was worth listening to, but that he should use care in making a decision about helping the troubled girl.

Jan Farby was slight without being thin, tall without being a flagstaff, a sun-bleached blonde, tanned by many suns and casually attired—flats, bare legs, wrap-around bronze skirt cut to fashionable length, pullover green and white striped tank shirt that left her smooth brown arms bare and no mysteries about the upper half of her torso. She also managed to look vaguely windblown, determined, and positive. She had a firm, mannish handshake, but that was all that was mannish about her. When she sat in the chair in front of his desk, crossed her knees and plopped a large purse on her lap, Shayne became aware of her legs.

Jan Farby had very beautiful legs.

Lucy's light on his telephone blinked as if she could see through the wall from her desk

in the outer office. Shayne swept up the receiver. "Yes?"

"She's loaded," Lucy breathed.

"Thank you."

"A jet-setter."

"Un-huh."

"The waterholes of Europe are her natural habitat."

"I'm beginning to wonder who is the detective around—"

"I read the newspapers, Michael Shayne! Jan Farby is in the newspapers all the—every so often. Incidentally, Spain has been her most recent hangout."

"Beautiful country, I hear."

"But she's been visiting a married sister right here in Miami the last few weeks. She supposedly left for Madrid last Friday. I saw an item in a gossip column. But I guess the columnist was all wet, huh?"

"Looks."

"Except."

"Yeah?"

"Jan Farby has a reason for still being here. She's been to a funeral today. This morning. It was in the papers. Her sister was Elizabeth Cardinal and Mrs. Cardinal was found dead in the family swimming pool."

"Yeah, I read the papers too, Angel."

"I'm sorry, Michael. Best I get off the horn, huh?"

"Best."

"I didn't want you going into this blind."

"I know."

"Michael?"

"Yeah?"

"Why do some girls have looks and wealth?"

"Not every girl can be born a secretary, Angel."

The abrupt click in his ear expanded Shayne's grin. He put the phone together. And then Jan Farby asked, "Did I pass inspection?"

Shayne kept the grin. Perception. He'd have to remember that about Jan Farby. He nodded, "Flying colors."

"Is she a good secretary?"

"The best."

"Do you mind if I smoke?"

Shayne dug out a cigarette package.

She shook her head and took a small cigar and a silver lighter from her purse. Her hand was steady as she lit the cigar.

"All right," Shayne said.

"Two things, Miss Farby: Who sent you to me? And what do you want?"

"Jason Paniel. And I want you to prove that a murder has been committed."

"Hmm. Paniel's an attorney, right?"

"He has been our family attorney for as long as I can remember."

"That would be—what? Twenty-eight, thirty years?"

"Who knows when memory begins, Mr. Shayne? But I'm

twenty-nine if that is what you wanted to know. I don't believe you are acquainted with Jason. At least, he says—"

"No," Shayne interrupted, "we've never met. But I know of him. He has the reputation of being an excellent man."

"He avoids the criminal field, Mr. Shayne."

"Everyone to his own passion."

"Jason handles wills, trusts, business ventures. He was my father's closest male confidant. My father made a fortune in minerals in his short life and Jason handled all of father's legal affairs. That, in itself, makes Jason a good man. Father's business ventures were complicated but he had confidence in Jason. Father and mother, incidentally, were killed in an automobile crash in Colorado five years ago last June."

Even after five years the abrupt loss of father and mother still had not been totally accepted by Jan Farby, Shayne thought.

Was that why she had been wasting good years flitting from waterhole to waterhole? Was she running, attempting to escape a harsh reality?

Shayne decided to leave psychology to the headshrinkers. "And this murder that you say has been committed?" he prodded.

Jan Farby drew on the tiny cigar. Unblinking, manila-colored eyes hung on the detective.

"My sister was Liz Cardinal. Perhaps you are familiar with the Cardinal name. It is—quite prominent in some Miami circles."

She paused, then flicked her cigar hand as if waving off a persistent mosquito. "No matter. Elizabeth was killed sometime last Friday or Saturday. Her husband, Ambrose, had her killed."

Shayne settled slightly lower in his chair behind the desk and used the thumb and first finger of his right hand to tug at the lobe of his left ear.

"I read about the death of Elizabeth Cardinal in the papers," he said. "I believe there was an official ruling of accidental drowning in the family swimming pool."

"What you didn't read, Mr. Shayne, was that Liz was intoxicated at the time of her death, was naked, might even have been raped. She was drowned by someone, that person having been hired by Ambrose Cardinal."

"I have a suspicion, Miss Farby," Shayne said slowly, "that you are now going to give me the name of that person."

"No." She shook her head. "I can't do that. If I could, I would have gone to the police."



Shayne grunted. "I was about to suggest that."

"All I know is," the girl continued as if the detective had not spoken, "Ambrose was the instigator. The killing may have been done by his personal bodyguard, an ex-convict named Sylvester Hondo, who is a beast. More likely, though, Ambrose put Sylvester Hondo up to hiring a killer off the streets."

Shayne sighed. "Miss Farby, Miami is not an orchard of professional killers in spite of its Mafia reputation in some quarters. You don't just pluck a killer like you might an orange. There might be five or six hit boys in town. If there are, most likely they'll be gone tomorrow. Those kind of people move around. Of course, we might have a kid or two eager to establish a

reputation, but the Ambrose Cardinals do not hire kids. The point, Miss Farby, is it's damned difficult to hire someone to kill for you."

"All right," Jan Farby accepted simply. "But my point is, Liz was murdered."

"The police apparently do not share your opinion."

She plunged on, "Mr. Shayne, allow me to present my side of this. I've been visiting in the United States for about a month, staying at the Cardinal mansion. It was strictly a family visit. My sister and I had not been together for about a year. She invited me here. Ambrose, I'm sure, was not pleased with my presence. I don't like my brother-in-law and he does not like me."

Shayne nodded.

"I ended my visit last Friday, flew back to Madrid. It was not an abrupt termination. Since arriving, I'd planned to leave on August 6th. Thursday, the previous day, Ambrose and Sylvester Hondo flew up to Ft. Lauderdale in Ambrose's private plane. It supposedly was a business trip, and perhaps it was. Ambrose is an investor, Mr. Shayne. In Ft. Lauderdale it is an apartment complex and a condominium. Out in the Florida Panhandle and in Canada it is oil. Here it is real estate."

"I get the picture, Miss

Farby," Shayne nodded. "Ambrose Cardinal and his man left the city on Thursday."

"Not to return until Saturday afternoon," she said.

"And you left when on Friday?"

"An early morning flight."

"Ambrose Cardinal knew about this planned departure, of course."

"Naturally."

"Are there servants in the Cardinal home?"

"No. Liz did not want domestics. She was only thirty-one years of age and she preferred to do for herself."

"So your sister was to be alone at the home from Friday morning until sometime Saturday afternoon."

"Ambrose was aware of this, Mr. Shayne."

"And you are now contending that he hired a hit man to murder your sister sometime Friday, Friday night, or Saturday morning."

"I say he returned Saturday afternoon fully expecting to find Liz dead. I say he would have been terribly upset and angry if he had not found her body in the pool."

Shayne said, "Hit men use guns, knives."

"There are many things about my sister you do not know, Mr. Shayne. One is that she had become a social drunk. She

became intoxicated daily. She was not a falling-down-drunk, she was a glow-drunk. She acquired a glow daily and nursed it along through all of her waking hours. Another thing is that she was an expert swimmer. Swimming was her lone exercise. She was a daily swimmer, too, and she often went naked to the pool, especially at night. She often took midnight swims, naked and alone, when she could not sleep."

"I believe you said she had been raped."

Jan Farby shrugged and smoked. "I suspect that she was. After all, she was a beautiful girl, she was naked, she was alone on a large estate, she might scream all night and no one would hear her, and God only knows what kind of a man Ambrose hired to—"

"Had she been sexually molested?" Shayne asked pointedly.

The girl hesitated.

"Frankly I don't know," she said. "I've been assuming. It was wrong of me."

"Was there any indication of forced entry into the house?"

"No."

"I assume there are valuables in the house."

"Many."

"But none are missing?"

"Mr. Shayne, Liz was not killed by a burglar."

"And perhaps she was not killed at all, Miss Farby. Perhaps she drowned accidentally, as the police believe."

"Will a five-thousand dollar fee change your mind?"

"No."

She nodded to herself. "Jason said it wouldn't. That was one of the reasons I came straight here after talking to him. All right, what will it take to get you on my side, Mr. Shayne?"

"Don't misunderstand, Miss Farby. Five thousand dollars has a nice ring to it. I can easily climb on your bandwagon for five thousand dollars. I can investigate twenty-four hours a day for three weeks for that kind of fee. But I can't promise to give you the answers you want to hear even if you up the ante to twenty-five thousand dollars."

She nodded. "You are what I want. An honest, sincere investigation of my sister's death. I truly expect you to discover that her husband did have her killed. Another thing you do not know about my sister, she had a lover. She was having an affair with a married man, a man named Jackson Ferguson, who lives down the street and around the corner. The Fergusons own the estate next door north to Liz and Ambrose. Jackson Ferguson is in textiles, I understand, inherited. He and his wife are thirtyish, reasonably likeable. I met them

on two party occasions while visiting Liz."

"And your sister told you all about her relationship with Jackson Ferguson, I assume," Mike Shayne sighed.

"You know about killers, Mr. Shayne," she shot back. "'Hit men' I believe you called them. Well, I know about sisters. Sisters confide."

Under other circumstances, Shayne might have chuckled. Female ferocity on being correct always amused him. Lucy Hamilton, for instance, could get in a hurricane snit when her absolute sureness was questioned.

But Shayne did not chuckle. He looked straight into the manila-colored eyes opposite him. "Are you telling me Ambrose Cardinal discovered his wife's infidelity and had her killed?"

"Ambrose is an egotistical, proud, extremely jealous man. Ambrose *owns*. And that included a wife."

Greedy, jealousy, desire, Shayne thought. Each bred the other. It could be a cocked triangle.

"All right, Miss Farby, you can write the check."

She wrote.

"If there are additional expenses, Mr. Shayne," she said, passing the check to him, "naturally I will take care of them."

"This will cover everything, Miss Farby."

"I'm staying at the Hilton."

III

JASON PANIEL, attorney, occupied a tenth floor suite in a tall building on Biscayne Boulevard. He was not in partnership. Which said something for Jason Paniel. To be a loner and occupy a suite, all business was not rushing past the front door, even if Jason Paniel did limit himself to wills and trusts and estates.

Shayne wanted to know about the Farby girls. He would have gone to his longtime reporter friend Tim Rourke at the *Daily News*, searched out the morgue files on the Farbys, except that Rourke was off to a seminar at the University of Missouri. He still could have searched the *News* morgue, of course, but the quickest route appeared to be through Jason Paniel.

Paniel was tied up with a client when Shayne arrived at the suite, but twenty minutes later a receptionist ushered the detective into a vast office with a sea-green carpeting, huge black desk, massive chairs and couch, and stark, black and white, unframed photographs of Miami scenes on the walls. Shayne approved of the appointments. "Counselor."

"Mr. Shayne."

Paniel's grip in handshake was rock-hard. But he seemed to be a softly polite little man of perhaps fifty with a thick mane of gray-black hair and bushy, gray-black eyebrows. He was attired impeccably in a gray suit and a red and black striped necktie.

Shayne sat in a comfortable chair in front of the black desk and said, "Jan Farby came to see me this afternoon, counselor. I've listened and I'm here."

Paniel pinched his lips and frowned slightly. "I sent Jan Farby to you because she was insistent on hiring a private detective. She came to me for a recommendation. If I had refused her, she still would have gone out and hired a man in your profession. And your profession, like mine, has its reputable and its disreputable."

"She could've got a boy who'd take her, all right," Shayne agreed. "She still could."

"Does that mean—"

"It means, counselor, I have her check in my wallet. But it does not mean that two days from now she will be satisfied with my work. She could want her money returned or she could dump me, write me off to a five thousand dollar extravagance."

"That much, eh?"

Shayne shrugged. "It was her figure. All I did was nod. How do



you feel about her conviction?"

"I think she is floundering in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean."

"She hasn't convinced me, either, but she'll get some miles out of me."

"We have a good police force in this city, Mr. Shayne. Competent men."

"Amen. On the other hand, they could've missed something. Cops are human."

"Perhaps," nodded Jason Paniel, "but I think they did not. I think Elizabeth Cardinal's death is exactly what the police say it is: accidental death by drowning. Frankly, I'm a bit puzzled by Jan Farby's insistence that it was something else."

"Do you happen to do work for Ambrose Cardinal?"

"I do not. I made most of my money off Henry Farby prior to

his death in 1966. Henry and I were roommates at the University of Florida. Henry went into minerals, I went into law.

"Henry made millions, I have yet to reach that pinnacle. I am close. I also think I would not be even close if it had not been for Henry. When Henry clicked in his mineral ventures he needed an attorney—immediately. I am an attorney. And I was his roommate at the university."

"And you still handle the Farby estate?"

"It was divided equally between Elizabeth, the first born, and Jan. Right down the line, fifty-fifty. Actually, Henry's wishes were quite simple, in mind and on paper. If he was to die prior to the demise of Mrs. Farby and the girls, it was fifty per cent to his wife and twenty-five per cent each to the girls. If Mrs. Farby passed on prior to Henry and the girls, it was to be changed automatically to fifty-fifty for the girls. In the event of either daughter's death prior to the demise of Henry and Wanda Farby—again automatically—the surviving daughter moved to fifty per cent. Should a daughter and mother die together, it was one hundred per cent to the surviving daughter after Henry's death. Should a father and daughter die...

"Mr. Shayne, I can make it sound complicated to you,

perhaps; if it is not. It was, and is share and share alike, if you will permit me. Very simple mathematics in all eventualities. Henry didn't want to even have to come into this office to change his will in the event suppositions became realities."

Shayne grunted, tugged at his ear. "Henry and Wanda Farby were killed in an automobile accident in Colorado in June of 1966. Correct?"

"Yes."

"And the daughters shared the estate. No fuss, no muss."

"I just explained—"

"How much did that estate amount to, counselor?"

"Nearly six million after all deductions and working business expenses satisfied. Of course, much of it was on paper."

"How much?"

"Three to four million."

"And how have the girls been doing since 1966?"

A slight cloud passed across Jason Paniel's face. "Elizabeth was holding her own. Jan—well, Jan has been living a different life."

"You mean Elizabeth allowed money to work for her while Jan has been throwing hers around?"

"I can't quote figures. Mr. Shayne. I don't have them."

"So Jan inherits from Elizabeth, as much as Elizabeth might have inherited from Jan."

"Yes," Paniel nodded.

"Then if Ambrose Cardinal had his wife killed, personal monetary gain on his part would not be realized even though he was the husband."

"Not from a standpoint of inheritance, no."

"You still handle the Farby legal matters, I assume."

"I am not on a retainer, but the girls have consulted me."

"Did Elizabeth have a drinking problem, Mr. Paniel?"

"That, of course, depends on who is considering her desire and capacity for alcohol. In her mind, she did not. In the minds of some others she did."

"In your mind?"

"She was a clinical case, yes."

"Did she have clinical help?"

"Discreetly. She consulted doctors, psychologists, and once entered a clinic for a very short period of time."

"At someone's insistence or of her will?"

"Ambrose Cardinal's insistence." Paniel's face muscles became set.

"Do you know Jackson Ferguson?" the detective said.

"I do not."

"Do you think there is foundation for Jan Farby's contention that he was Elizabeth's lover?"

"I have absolutely no idea," Paniel said.

"How would Ambrose Cardinal react if he suddenly

discovered that his wife was having an affair?"

"I can't even begin to answer that question, either, Mr. Shayne."

Shayne sighed, stirred in the chair. "Okay, so now all I have to do is make a decision. Do I launch an investigation, stir up hornets, or do I return a five thousand dollar check?"

"It seems to me, Mr. Shayne, that you already have launched."

"I don't like chasing butterflies, counselor. I didn't when I was a kid."

"To use today's vernacular, Mr. Shayne, how do you earn your bread?"

Michael Shayne grinned suddenly and shoved up out of the chair.

"Okay."

IV

MIKE SHAYNE got lucky. He found Will Gentry, the chief of the Miami detective bureau, alone in his police headquarters office. Tipped back in his desk chair, Gentry looked half asleep. Shayne grinned on his friend of long standing. "I thought crime knew no holidays, Will."

Gentry grunted and fingered his eyes, sat forward. "Crime doesn't," he said, "but cops sometimes sneak an hour. What's up, Mike?"

Shayne lit a cigarette. "Can I

see the file on Elizabeth Cardinal?"

Gentry lifted grizzled eyebrows. He said, "Her funeral was this morning. She was put away forever. And we're on the verge of doing the same thing with her file."

Shayne said, "I've got a sister who is crying murder, Will."

"The hell you say! Jan Farby?"

"Yeah."

"What's her pitch? How come she doesn't come to us?"

Shayne explained and Gentry listened in silence. When Shayne finished, Gentry sat for several seconds, his heavy features impassive. Then he called for the file, put the phone together and said, "As far as we're concerned, Mike, this one is clean all the way. The woman was alone at the home. She drowned accidentally. Period."

"Was the medical examiner able to pin down the exact time of death?"

"Come on, Mike. You know he can't do that. But he can get close. As I recall, it was around five Saturday morning. Doc figured the victim was intoxicated, became cramped and drowned."

"Maybe Elizabeth Cardinal entertained Friday evening and someone carried over to Saturday morning."

"Possible," Gentry admitted.

"But if so, someone did a helluva cleaning job."

"Or maybe someone wandered onto the grounds while the lady was swimming. Just how private is this estate, Will?"

"No wall, no dogs. It could've happened that way, yeah. On the other hand, Doc didn't turn up any suspicious marks or blemishes on the body, no suggestion of sexual attack or accomplishment. And the house wasn't forceably entered."

"I'm just throwing out thoughts, Will."

"I think I'd rather you spared me. All of a sudden, you're making us cops sound incompetent."

A policewoman entered the office with a folder. Gentry leafed through the sheets of paper inside, then passed the folder to Shayne. Shayne read the content quickly and thoroughly. Among neighbors and acquaintances who had been interviewed by the police were the Jackson Fergusons, but there was no mention of undue emotion at the girl's death by Mr. Ferguson.

Shayne closed the folder. "I noticed your people made a few calls to Ft. Lauderdale," he said.

Gentry shrugged. "Ambrose Cardinal and Sylvester Hondo were in Lauderdale all day Thursday and Friday and out in the Panhandle Saturday morning.

Cardinal called in his wife's death at 2:46 Saturday afternoon. We're satisfied that their unaccounted-for time was not long enough to make a flight back here, then return to an oil field. It was a routine check, Mike."

"Maybe Cardinal and his boy made your work easy. Maybe they wanted you to be able to track them."

Gentry lifted eyebrows again. "And that means?"

"What's the line on this Hondo?"

"He's a tough boy, a native of the area. He's been brushing the law most of his life. Six arrests on various suspicions, one conviction. At the time of the conviction, we swore it was murder by auto, but a jury said manslaughter. He did seven years at Raiford, paroled in 1965. That's when Cardinal took him under his wing. Hondo's been with Cardinal since and clean except for one minor scrape. It was a couple of years ago in a nightclub. Hondo beat the hell out of a guy who had been pestering Cardinal.

"There was some question about the law and Hondo using his fists since once long ago Hondo made a stab at professional boxing. But the matter never got to court. I suspect some Cardinal money exchanged hands somewhere but try to prove that kind of thing, Mike,

especially when the complainant stands before you wearing a mouse eye, a pumpkin nose and a split lip and swears to God he suddenly can't identify the guy who beat on him."

"Makes you want to become a shoe salesman, doesn't it? *Shoe salesmen have got problems too, I imagine.*" "But you're satisfied Ambrose Cardinal and Hondo are clean on this death thing."

"I was until you walked in here, yeah. Have you got something I don't know, Mike?"

"How about Elizabeth Cardinal and a lover?"

Gentry bobbed his head. "That's not news. Who have you been talking to besides the sister?"

"No one."

"Miss Farby hasn't missed much, has she?"

"Sisters confide, I'm told. I assume you leaned on Jackson Ferguson."

"He told all after a couple of false starts," Gentry nodded. "He also claimed the affair ended two months ago. By mutual agreement. Our information from other sources would substantiate that it did."

"You mean a clandestine affair was not so clandestine?"

"We got a hint or two and pinned Ferguson."

"One of those hints didn't happen to come from Cardinal, did it?"

"Christ, no!"

"But what if he did know?"

"Then I wouldn't want to be in Mrs. Card—" Gentry clamped off the words, scowled. "Mike, I'm gonna level with you. I wouldn't want to cross Cardinal. I get the impression the man can be ruthless."

"Any strangers in town, Will?"

Gentry's scowl deepened. "A couple of punks down from New York, one new kid in from Detroit, but they're under surveillance. And none were here last weekend, if that's what you're getting at. Of course, someone could have slipped in and slipped out unnoticed. It happens occasionally."

"Cardinal money could buy that kind of man, Will."

"This is the sister's pitch? Cardinal hired a hit?"

"She thinks so," Shayne agreed, rising.

Gentry looked up from under the grizzled brows. "Pressing business? You just got here."

"Maybe a run out to the Cardinal place. Want to ride along?"

"And miss a lamb roast supper?"

Shayne grinned.

Gentry said, "Take it easy with Cardinal, Mike. He's just the kind of guy who makes half his fortune suing other people."

Shayne walked out of police

headquarters. It was five-thirty in the afternoon, a warm, bright afternoon. He remembered the Cardinal address from the file folder and moved toward his topdown convertible in the police parking lot. A public telephone booth loomed in the corner of his eye. He curved to it, dialed his office. Lucy Hamilton had closed down for the day. He looked up the Cardinal number and dialed again.

A male voice told him: "Mr. Cardinal's residence."

"I'd like to speak to Mr. Cardinal."

"Mr. Cardinal is not at home. Who is calling, please?"

"Michael Shayne."

There was hesitation on the other end of the line, as if the name might have surprised, and then the voice changed. It became gruff: "Shayne? The private peeper? What do you want?"

"To speak to Cardinal, Sylvester," Shayne said, also turning tough. "Put him on."

"I told yuh, he ain't here."

"When's he going to be there?"

"To you, never, peeper."

"I must break down a door, huh?"

"I sincerely hope you try, shamus."

The click in the redhead's ear was loud. He held the receiver

away from his ear and scowled on it for a moment. He suddenly was perspiring. He dropped inside the convertible and sat for a while, slapping the steering wheel. He abruptly was hot and irritated, and he knew from experience that nobody who was hot and irritated made miles. He drove to a bar and grill.

The bartender grinned at him.

"Hi, Mike."

"Hi, Sean."

The bartender put cognac and a glass of icewater before him. "Good for the nerve ends," he said sagely.

Shayne grunted and curled fingers around the glass of cognac. "They're showing that much, huh?"

"They're showing," Sean said. "And don't look now, but so is a friend."

Shayne scowled. Will Gentry had put a tail on him?

"I'd say she's thirty," Sean continued. "A blonde, and a looker. Very nice legs. She popped in here like she'd lost something, then she spotted you, Mike, and relaxed. Prepare yourself. Here she comes."

Jan Farby climbed into the chair stool beside the detective and ordered a martini.

"Very dry," she said before she smiled on Shayne. "Hi. You've been busy. I wondered when you were going to take a break."

Shayne cracked a knuckle on his left hand. "You've had a change of heart? You want your check returned?"

The brightness disappeared from Jan Farby's face. "My gosh, no!"

"So what are you doing here?" he asked bluntly.

The bluntness put her off balance. "Well, I—Look, I can't just sit in a hotel room."

"And I dislike being followed."

She clamped her lips slightly, then she sipped the martini. "Okay," she said finally, pouting slightly. "I'll go buy out a magazine stand."

"Do that," the detective said sourly. And then he eased. "But after I buy you dinner, okay?"

Jan Farby looked mildly surprised.

"Sure," she said.

They made dinner a relaxing affair. By silent, mutual agreement, it seemed, neither brought up the death of Elizabeth Cardinal. Shayne never liked a question and answer session with a meal and the girl seemed to understand. So their conversation was idle and inconsequential and the detective was in a relaxed frame of mind when he finally escorted Jan Farby to the rent car in the parking lot. He put her inside and leaned against the frame of the open window. Warm Tuesday dusk was on the

city. Lights were beginning to glitter.

"I think some of the newsstands are still open," he grinned.

Jan Farby grimaced slightly. "Hotel rooms make me think of prisons."

And then she drove off.

Shayne drove at a leisurely pace out to the Cardinal mansion. He kept an eye in the rear view mirror, watching for trailing headlights. There were none. When he turned into the horseshoe drive at the mansion, his lights swept across grounds that looked as if they had been laid out by slide rule.

He braked at the top of the horseshoe and sat for a moment looking around. No other cars were in sight. Light poured from the windows of a sprawling, low slung house that probably was as modern as tomorrow. He went up to the door and lifted a thumb. The door opened before he could use the thumb.

"Yes?" said a tall man.

The tall man was neither polite nor disrespectful. But he was a guardian. No doubt. No one was going past him and into the house without his moving. He was dressed casually in dark flared trousers and a dark shirt that was open at the neck. He had wavy black hair and bunches of toned muscles. He also had the tattoo of a fly on the back of

his left hand and eyes that gleamed like poisoned arrow tips.

"Hondo?" Shayne said.

The tall man frowned, then said softly, "Oh, damn. Shayne." He came out onto the veranda and Shayne gave a few steps out of politeness.

"Beat it," Sylvester Hondo said.

"Not without talking to Ambrose Cardinal," the detective balked. "It's a long drive out here."

Without warning, Sylvester Hondo stabbed ten stiff fingers against Shayne's chest and propelled the detective off the veranda. Hondo followed through with a jolting right into Shayne's midsection and a left hook against the ear. Shayne went to his hands and knees, suddenly gasping for air. A foot against his ribs sent him rolling. Then the foot was pounding him savagely.

"A stomper," the detective thought.

He caught the flailing leg and twisted.

V

MIKE SHAYNE blinked against the white ceiling of the hospital room. He knew he was propped slightly in a high bed and that Lucy Hamilton was somewhere nearby. Her apple scent penetrated the blah odor of



anesthetic like a fresh ocean breeze pouring along a tunnel into a cave.

"Michael?"

Her beautiful, worried face appeared over him and he tried on a grin. "What's the other guy look like, Angel?"

Her worry deepened for just a second and then her face cleared. She smiled. "Ohhh, you nut." She arched and kissed him lightly. The apple scent was strong.

He attempted to sit up, but Lucy put hands against his shoulders and pressed. "Where do you think you're going? Dancing?"

"Hell, I'm not dead," he said, but he gave in to the pressure of the hands and the swirling that started up suddenly inside his head. The swirling subsided quickly when he lay quiet.

Lucy said, "Your car is a

mess, Michael. Miss Farby said the police had it towed away. She called me after the ambulance brought you here."

Jan Farby hadn't found an open magazine stand?

"She said a man named Sylvester Hondo beat on you terribly, Michael. She said he kicked and—"

"I remember, Angel," Shayne interrupted with a lift of his hand. "Vividly."

He tried moving other parts of his body. Everything seemed to work. But his ribs felt wrapped in cement. "Put my head higher, Lucy."

"Do you think you should?" She sounded worried again. "The doctor should be back here in a few minutes. Why don't you—"

"I want to sit up, doll, get the cobwebs out of my skull."

She propped him at a forty-five degree angle. He closed his eyes, kept them closed for a few seconds. When he blinked them open everything remained in focus. Lucy was at his left side, biting her lower lip. Jan Farby stood at the foot of her bed, her face impassive, but the eyes worried. A youthful nurse was at his right side. Deep brown eyes matched the color of her hair. Soft curves gave her face a heart shape. A tiny bar badge on her white uniform said *Willacy*.

"Mary Willacy," she smiled against the unasked question.

"But you can call me Willacy. Everybody does. How are you feeling, Mr. Shayne?"

"Ready to take on a den of tigers."

"It would seem that you already have been that route," she said, professionally fingering a bandage that had been wrapped around his head. "One of the interns will be up to see you soon. Meanwhile, this is a regular convention center. You have another visitor. A policeman named Gentry. Surprised?"

"I didn't know he cared."

"Well, you're not Number One on his list." Nurse Willacy conceded. "He's already been upstairs to see another patient."

"Who?"

Nurse Willacy shrugged. "I don't know. Sixth Floor West is my domain. That's where you are. And it's eleven-thirty o'clock on Tuesday night." She turned suddenly to Lucy Hamilton and Jan Farby. "Long past visiting hours," she said significantly.

Shayne grinned and said to no one in particular, "Eleven-thirty. It seems I have been snoozing." Then he looked Jan Farby straight in the eye. "Get some magazines."

She nodded without saying anything. Shayne winked at Lucy. She looked puzzled at the last remark, but he didn't bother to explain.

"And don't think you can be

late opening up in the morning, Angel," he said. "I'll be there waiting for you."

"Optimists," said Nurse Willacy from somewhere, "are refreshing around this joint. Okay, ladies. the man lives. Time to depart."

But Jan Farby didn't seem to want to go. "Are you convinced now, Mike, that all is not kosher?"

"I'm convinced, Miss Farby, that Sylvester Hondo is one tough nut."

Nurse Willacy ushered the two women out of the room and Will Gentry entered. He looked unhappy. He used a meaty thumb to shove a hat to the back of his head and he drew a long breath into his barrel-like chest.

"I should've sacrificed a lamb roast," he said.

"You missed a helluva fight," Shayne conceded.

"Hondo?"

"Yep."

"I ran into Lucy downstairs in the lobby. That's how I knew you were here. But she didn't have details. I'd like to hear some now."

Shayne shrugged. "I hit the Cardinal front door. I didn't get inside. Hondo started stomping on me almost with my first breath."

"What did you do or say to—"

"Nothing."

"Come on, Mike. A guy

doesn't just answer a ring and start beating on whoever is on the threshold."

"Hondo did. I have the definite impression I was not welcome."

"How come?"

"I'm a detective, not a mind-reader, Will."

Gentry shuffled and scowled. "Damn it, Mike, things are beginning to stink."

"Things?"

"Elizabeth Cardinal's death."

"Who's upstairs?"

"Jackson Ferguson," he said reflexively. Then he paused, stared hard at Shayne. "How'd you know I've been upstairs?"

"A nurse named Willacy. What's with Ferguson?"

"Someone took a shot at him tonight. Grazed his skull. He isn't hurt, but he's scared into the year 2000. He's already sent his wife out to get two air tickets to Tokyo."

"My turn, Will," Shayne said flatly. "Details."

"The guy's home with his wife. He and the wife are in the front room, drapes open. The Fergusons seldom close downstairs drapes. It's a few minutes after ten o'clock, maybe five after. The Fergusons are watching television news. The commercials are over and the news has just come on. Ferguson has been standing at a full-length window, staring out on the night. He

doesn't remember why. His wife is seated across the room to his left. With the start of the news, Ferguson turns from the window. And in that instant a pane of glass splatters on him and a bullet skims his skull. Pandemonium."

"Wow, how could a sniper miss?"

"The turn did it, Mike. No question."

"Continue."

Gentry shrugged. "Ferguson is down and stunned, but the wife thinks he is dead. She sees blood. She calls us, and then an ambulance. I flagged it out here just in case the victim wasn't dead. He wasn't and isn't going to die. The first I knew it was Ferguson was when I got his name downstairs in the emergency section."

"Who'd you get the details from? Ferguson or his wife?"

"Fifty-fifty. She was with him when I got here."

"I don't suppose either of them ventured an opinion as to who might have—"

"Ferguson doesn't have an enemy in the world, and that's a mutual statement."

"Somebody shoots through a window at one of them every night, huh?"

"It happens so often, it gets boring. That's why Mrs. Ferguson is out buying tickets to Tokyo right now."

"I assume, Will, you are going to stop them."

"There are a few wheels turning. Passports should slow them, unless Mrs. Ferguson knows a good forger. And even then—"

"Ambrose Cardinal, aware of infidelity, could've had his wife killed, could've sent the same hit man, or another, after Jackson Ferguson. Put it together and it might account for why I'm here. Things at the Cardinal home were especially uptight tonight. If I'd gone out there last night, or tomorrow night, nothing. But tonight—"

Shayne let the thought hang and Gentry spent some time chewing on it. Then he said abruptly, "Okay, see you."

"Hey, hold it! Where are you going?"

"Out to find a sniper."

"I'll tag along."

"Yeah?" Gentry's sour expression lifted. He looked mildly amused. "Try it."

Shayne pitched the top sheet, resoluteness alive in him, and swung his legs over the side of the bed. His bare feet barely grazed the floor. For just an instant he experienced the sensation that he felt terribly exposed in the hospital gown with its open back, and then he broke out in a cold sweat and the dizziness was on him.

Nurse Willacy popped into the

room. To the detective she was just a fuzzy object moving in on him. "Going for a walk, Mr. Shayne?"

Her voice seemed to come from far away and she sounded extremely polite. Shayne attempted to growl, "Got work to do, Willacy," but he wasn't sure it came out a growl at all.

"Haven't we all?" she said, still distant, still polite. And then she tapped him with light fingers as he attempted to stand and he fell back on the bed. She lifted his feet and flopped them. From somewhere he heard Will Gentry laugh.

Michael Shayne knew he should get up and make Gentry swallow that laugh, but he decided to sleep instead.

VI

MIKE SHAYNE awoke to sunshine. The hospital room was brilliant. He lay for a long while blinking at the ceiling and testing his memory.

Gingerly, Shayne left the bed and stood. Not bad. His feet and legs held him erect this morning. He flexed his fingers and worked his arms. All of the bones and muscles seemed to work. But there were small stabs of pain in his ribs and chest when he moved too fast. He felt himself. He seemed encased. He went to a door mirror. He needed a shave.



There was a blue-black lump high on his left cheekbone and a white swath around his head. He poked the swath here and there, felt nothing.

"Mr. Shayne!"

The disturbed nurse was red-haired and lumpy like himself. Only her lumps were in different places. He grunted. "Where's Willacy?"

"Willacy is off duty until three this afternoon. Go back to your bed, please."

Shayne grinned. "Who are you?"

"Strudeviant."

"Strudeviant, I love you, but it's time to roll."

She called a doctor and a male nurse. The doctor prodded and poked and examined and took his temperature while the male

nurse stood by like a prison guard. Finally the doctor seemed satisfied.

"How soon do I get out, Doc?"

"Perhaps tomorrow."

"What about in the next hour?"

The doctor shook his head, became stern. "You are here to mend, Mr. Shayne. Mending takes time."

They fed him a soggy breakfast. He was restless. He prowled the hospital room. Other than an occasional flick of pain in his rib area, he felt fine. He telephoned Lucy Hamilton at the office. She thought he sounded great.

"Angel, did Gentry happen to tell you what room Jackson Ferguson is in?"

"709," she said promptly. "Will didn't tell me, but the girl at the entrance desk did last night. I thought you might be asking."

Shayne grinned. "Good girl. You got anything planned for lunch?"

"No." She suddenly sounded deeply curious.

"Then hang tight in the office. Maybe we'll have it together."

Still grinning, he put the phone together before she could quiz him. He went out into the hallway, spotted Strudeviant talking to another nurse at a desk.

He flicked fingers at her, smiled.

"Are you supposed to be up?" she wanted to know.

"Just testing things," he said. "I want to see if there are any broken pieces you people missed. Okay?"

"Well, be careful."

He winked at her and wandered down the long corridor toward a door with a red fire light over it. He stood at a window near the door and stared out on the concrete parking area and the shiny tops of cars. Then he turned casually. Strudeviant was bent over a chart on her desk, writing. The other nurse was gone.

He ducked through the fire door and found himself on a steel stairwell. He went up. His legs worked okay but he had to be careful how he worked his arms. Sylvester Hondo had put many lumps on his ribs.

He slipped into the corridor on the seventh floor and saw three nurses moving away from him. He wandered along and found Room 709. The door was ajar. He pushed it open and entered the private room.

The man propped in the high bed was alone in the room, had a hooked nose and was deeply tanned. He looked late thirtyish and in excellent physical condition. He apparently was a man who pampered his body. There were no extra bulges, only the

bandage wrapped around his skull.

The man also looked like he might jump out the window, he was that frightened when Shayne walked in.

"Easy, Mr. Ferguson," Shayne said. He grinned in an attempt to put Ferguson at ease as he approached the bed. "My name is Mike Shayne. I'm a private investigator. I've been retained by Jan Farby. Miss Farby thinks her sister, Elizabeth Cardinal, was the victim of a murderer—and if you reach for any buttons I'll break your arm."

Ferguson let his arm drop. His fingers flexed, but remained away from buttons. He had paled under the tan, and he was wide-eyed.

Shayne plunged on. "I understand you and Mrs. Cardinal were acquainted. I also understand someone took a shot at you last night. Do you figure there's a connection between Mrs. Cardinal's death and the shooting?"

Ferguson attempted to speak, but failed to get sound.

Shayne continued, "Maybe Ambrose Cardinal didn't like the idea of you and his—"

Ferguson found his voice. "I don't know who you are, Shayne, but please leave!" he shouted.

Shayne winced. "Simmer down, pal. Maybe I can help you. Hell, I'm not here to finish last

night's job. I'm who I said I was, a private detective doing a job for Miss Farby."

"And just what is that job?" a feminine voice behind the detective asked.

He turned and looked on a brownette of thirty-five who had slim-hipped tallness. She looked determined and slightly defiant as eyes that kept changing color—pale green to gray to robin egg blue back to green—measured him.

"I am Audry Ferguson," she said, coming deeper into the room. "Who are you?"

He explained without going into the connection between Jackson Ferguson and Elizabeth Cardinal. If Audry Ferguson was aware of her husband's infidelity, Shayne decided he wanted to hear it from her.

But she asked, "And just why do you think there may be a link between the death of Elizabeth and the attempt on Jackson's life, Mr. Shayne?"

She was wide open, of course, but a glance at Ferguson told Shayne: Ferguson figured he had hoodwinked his wife, Ferguson did not want her to know, Ferguson was afraid for his marriage.

"Well, you and the Cardinals are neighbors," Shayne said. He wished Audry Ferguson was across town someplace, at a ballgame, anywhere but in the

room. He wanted to work on Jackson Ferguson alone.

"Are you suggesting there may be a demented killer prowling our neighborhood?"

Shayne leaped at the opening. "Either that, or somebody took a shot at your husband for a reason, Mrs. Ferguson."

She frowned. "But why would anyone want to shoot Jackson?"

"I don't know. I was hoping you could tell me."

"There isn't any reason."

"Okay, so we go to the screwball with a gun in his hand, somebody who gets his kicks out of prowling dark streets and shooting bullets through lighted windows. Have you noticed anyone like that around the neighborhood? Of course, in Elizabeth Cardinal's case, there were no bullets—"

"You keep wanting to tie the two incidents, Mr. Shayne," Audry Ferguson interrupted. "Can't Elizabeth's death and last night's affair be two entirely unrelated happenings? Incidentally, did someone shoot you, too? You look as if—"

"I had a car wreck."

"Mr. Shayne," put in Jackson Ferguson, "please get out."

The detective stared at the bedded man for a couple of seconds, then sighed. He moved around Audry Ferguson to the door. No miles here. He was

spinning wheels in sand. "Well, see you. Or will I? I understand you two are heading for Tokyo."

"As soon as Jackson is released," Audry Ferguson nodded. Then she frowned again. "But how did you know?"

"I'm not a loner, Mrs. Ferguson," Shayne said. "Nor one of these fictionalized private eyes who wars with the police. In addition to being roughly in the same line of work, the chief of Miami police detectives and I are friends."

Shayne went down the fire escape stairs and returned to the sixth floor. Nurse Strudeviant was hanging in the doorway of his room, looking worried.

"Where have you been?" she wanted to know, sounding angrily distraught.

He grinned. "Up on the roof, getting some sunshine. It's a beautiful Miami morning."

The phone in his room jangled. "Excuse me." He winked at Strudeviant and went to the phone. Will Gentry asked, "How's it this morning, Mike?"

"I feel like I'm in one of your jail cells," he said, glancing over his shoulder. Strudeviant still hung in the doorway. "And the warden's watching me."

Strudeviant snapped her head and disappeared. Shayne laughed gently, then sobered. "I've been upstairs, talking to Ferguson, and I don't know any more than

when I went up. His wife popped in on us. Does she know about Ferguson and Elizabeth Cardinal?"

"I haven't talked to her, Mike. Not really talked. That's on my schedule today. But I can tell you one thing. Behind all that cool, she's a frightened woman. She's the one who marched out to get the Tokyo tickets."

"Have you got that blocked?" Shayne said.

"There'll be a delay, yeah."

"Find a sniper?"

"Oh, sure. The town's loaded."

"I've got to get out of this joint, Will."

"Don't tell me, friend. I'm not a doctor. I just wanted to know how you are getting along."

"Lousy."

Gentry chuckled. "See you."

Shayne telephoned Lucy Hamilton.

"Are you downstairs?" she asked airily.

"Oh, sure."

"Well, you said we might lunch together, Michael. And it's almost lunch time."

"Get over here with your car."

Lucy turned serious. "Are you being released?"

"Shayne released. I'm walking out."

"Michael!"

"Twenty minutes, Angel. The

parking lot side. I'm counting on you."

He put the phone together on a string of words and went to a closet. Yesterday's street clothing hung inside. It was rumpled and grass-stained and there was a small tear in one trouser leg.

Shayne stopped long enough at the door mirror to take the swath from his head. He unveiled a livid slash that looked like a streak of fiery lightening dancing down across his forehead. He grunted and jammed his hat on the back of his head.

Strudeviant gasped as he walked past her, moving swiftly.

"See you around, warden," he said.

He went past the two elevators and down a flight of steps. In his mind's eye, he could see Strudeviant on the floor telephone, calling for an army of male nurses to intercept him in the lobby. He entered the fifth floor corridor and walked its length, moving past people in white as if he owned the hospital. He went through the fire door and down the steel stairway.

His rib area became numb. He trotted down to the basement without seeing anyone and then found steps that led up to the parking lot. He angled through the collection of cars and out to a street. Lucy Hamilton had not arrived. He put his hips against

the nose of a sedan and lit a cigarette. Miami at noon was hot and he ached, but he was free and moving. He felt more like the Michael Shayne he knew.

Lucy whipped her sedan into the curbing in front of him. She looked cool, crisp and calm in a short green dress when he popped onto the front seat beside her. Her legs and hands worked and they entered the glut of traffic. Shayne glanced at her legs and decided they looked every bit as toned as those of Jan Farby. He grinned.

"You look terrible," Lucy said.

"Sure, sure."

"Where are we going?"

"To my apartment so I can change clothes, then it's your pick."

"I feel in the mood for a small but expensive lunch."

"You're feeling normal, huh?" Shayne laughed at Lucy's glance and added, "After lunch you can take a cab and drop around to the hospital and work out the insurance thing. Then you can have the afternoon off."

"While you do what?"

"Cruise, Angel. Mike Shayne is going to borrow your car and cruise some of Miami's more scenic neighborhoods."

VII

MIKE SHAYNE killed the entire hot afternoon in the

seamy environs of the city. He searched, questioned, coddled and prodded derelicts, prostitutes, winos, hot-shot kids, pawn shop keepers, bartenders, taxi drivers, longhairs, shorthairs, unemployed beach boys and informers.

The result was zip. The city's jungles were quiet. It was too hot, too steamy. Action was out. Siesta was in. Nobody killed on such boiler room days. If there had been a sniper in town, he was gone. He probably had been a Yankee. Yankees did not really understand the dangers of very hot weather.

If the red-haired detective was looking for a sniper-man, go north. Find himself a Yankee who had made a quick trip to Miami, some fool who didn't understand that too much sweat, too much heat could give you heart attacks.

Shayne nursed the rye. It was doubtful the bartender had ever heard of cognac. The Spot was that kind of hole in the wall, the bartender that kind of loser. There were two other customers, a drunk snoozing in a corner booth and a dark woman in a shawl at the end of the bar. For a few seconds the woman bothered Shayne. A shawl when it was 96 degrees outside and 106 inside The Spot? Finally he decided the shawl helped keep off the flies.



He had just ordered a second rye when Beady accosted him. Beady came out of nowhere and sidled up on the torn stool beside the detective. It figured. Beady was a ferret. Beady was ageless, looked and smelled like garbage, and had more wrinkles than an accordian.

But he had bright, alert eyes, and once he had been an expert pickpocket. That was before age had caught up with him and he had started to fumble. So now he was an informer. For a halfway decent price.

"Mike."

"Beady."

"Hot, ain't it?"

"Very hot."

"Heat makes a guy thirsty."

"Bring the man a rye, barkeep."

"I'd rather have a cold bottle of beer."

"A cold beer, barkeep. Very cold."

"Thank you, Mike. You've been busy this afternoon."

"Very busy, yes, Beady."

"But that's how it goes sometimes."

"How's that?"

"A man runs in water."

"He gets tired," Shayne admitted. "You still dealing in fives, Beady?"

"Tens, Mike. Inflation. I've got sympathy for this guy Nixon, un'erstand. I go along with his program. But inflation is inflation. What you once could get for five now costs ten."

"But your friend Nixon put a freeze on money, Beady." He smiled.

But Shayne opened his wallet. He had two tens, one five, four ones and a folded check for five thousand dollars inside. He took the five and the four ones from the wallet, folded them and tucked them in Beady's shirt pocket.

Beady grunted. "The way I counted, Mike, it came up nine."

"I'm fighting inflation, Beady. Also I'm paying for the beer."

"Yeah, there's that," Beady nodded.

"Tell me what you've seen."

"Nothing."

"Heard."

"Well, there's a guy over on the Beach. Name is Rooster. He ain't been around lately, and that's why I haven't seen. It could be a sign."

"Of?"

"Rooster'll do anything for a buck. Some guys will, yuh know."

"Un-huh; but—"

"A week ago," Beady cut in, "I'm in another place. Yuh know, it's a nice night and I'm just cruisin'. So I hit this place. And Rooster is there, crowin' and flashin' big bread like he's won in a craps game, or a rich sister has died, or he's got a down payment on something. Anyway, I'm there and he's tellin' all the flakes 'bout this big deal he's got comin' up. He ain't sayin' what the big deal is, you understand, but he's happy as the guy who fell in a mudhole and discovered the slime was oil. So after that night Rooster disappears."

Shayne plucked the nine dollars from the old man's shirt pocket. Gnarled fingers caught his wrist.

"Hold it, Mike," Beady bleated, looking injured. "I ain't puttin' yuh on. That's how this Rooster operates. When he ain't on a job, he's cruisin'. You see him everywhere. But if he's workin', he drops out of sight. You don't see him until the job

is done. He gets off juice, women, free artichokes—everything!"

"So this Rooster has habits, Beady. His habits I don't need to know about, not for nine little ones."

"What I'm tryin' to tell yuh, Michael, is this Rooster is not above bein' a gun!"

"I know this town up and down, east and west, Beady. I know the Beach, and I've never heard of Rooster."

"Okay! He's small spuds, but he exists! You could miss a guy or two along the line, yuh know. Gentry could miss one. Peter Painter, over on the Beach, could miss one. You guys don't know everybody. Anyway, Rooster ain't been in the territory long. A year, maybe. Came in from out west someplace, Sacramento, I think it was. Sometimes he seems sorta retired, sometimes he don't."

Beady paused, then sighed. He removed his fingers from Shayne's wrist and drank beer.

"Mike," he said, suddenly sounding low, "Rooster may be as clean as your aunt's favorite choir boy, or maybe he's hightailed it back out west, I dunno. All I know is, I hear you're lookin' for a gun. There ain't been any action among the regulars, in fact, a few people in this town are damned curious about this Ferguson thing last

night—and Rooster has pulled in his head. So it's a trial balloon for you. What else you got?"

Shayne considered, then stuffed the nine dollars back in the old man's shirt pocket. "Okay, Beady. Where do I find Rooster?"

"Mike!" Beady sounded injured again. "I don't know everything."

Miami sparkled at dusk. Miami Beach glittered. Shayne drove Collins Avenue slowly. This was Peter Painter territory. It was not verboten terrain to the Miami detective, but it behooved Shayne to walk on eggs in Painter-land. Painter was chief of detectives on the Beach, The Law, and anti-Shayne. Painter did not like Shayne; Shayne did not like Painter. Nothing complicated about that.

Shayne found a parking slot under a canopy in a sparkling drive-in, ordered a hamburger, plain, with iced tea and asked for Mary.

The carhop was young, energetic and efficient—she was especially energetic and efficient when a large red-haired man with a beat-up mug asked for the boss.

Mary was frowning when she came out of the interior of the drive-in, and she continued to frown all the way to the sedan. Then she recognized Shayne and smiles popped out all over her smooth black face. She sat on

the front seat beside the detective and patted her piled-high hair.

"You-all look beautiful, doll," she said. "Scared that poor girl o' mine half to death. Who stepped on you? A horse?"

"I'm looking for a guy called Rooster, Mary. Supposed to be somewhere on the Beach. Been here about a year, I understand."

She nodded. "He is, has been. You-all go on down Collins to The Silver Arms. You know the Silver Arms, Mike?"

"I do not know the Silver Arms, Mary."

"Apartments for rent. Rooster's in the basement."

"Thanks."

"How's the burger?"

"Excellent."

She grinned, got out of the sedan, leaned in the open window. "Rooster's a flash, love. No big threat, even to a wounded man." She laughed and was gone.

Shayne grunted, finished the hamburger, drank the iced tea, and beeped the horn. Being a private detective was not so bad. Sometimes you asked simple questions and you got simple answers.

The Silver Arms gleamed on the outside, smelled of pizza and grease on the inside. Shayne didn't bother to knock on a door marked *Manager*. He went along a ground floor corridor, found a door that opened on steps going

into the basement and went down into the dimness. A single bulb in another long corridor was the lone illumination. The corridor smelled musty. Shayne belched. This Rooster was a high liver.

Shayne found a closed door. He looked around, listened hard. Nothing. He sighed and lifted large knuckles and rapped. Silence. He sniffed and started to rap again, then stiffened with his fist poised. He sniffed several times, dragging for the peculiar odor. His brow became corrugated, his eyebrows went down, and he suddenly had the sensation that perhaps he should have strapped on a gun.

He gently tried the door knob. It turned without a squeak under his fingertips. He hesitated, then eased the door open a crack. There was dull light behind the door. He put an eye against the crack and inventoried. He guessed that he was eyeballing what was the substitute for a living room. He had a sagging chair and a couple of cheap scatter rugs in line. Scotch taped on the cement block wall behind the chair was a centerfold girl from a *Playboy* magazine. No sound came to him.

He eased the door open and stared on the rest of the room. It was supposed to be a living room, all right. It was cluttered

with odds and ends of male clothing, a newspaper, several magazines and five empty beer bottles. Light came from two small lamps. In the opposite wall was another door that was open about a foot. Shayne was at the wrong angle to see inside the second room.

He crossed the living room, his scowl remaining deep and his gray eyes busy. He used a toe to ease open the second door. The bedroom was tiny.

There was a drooping bed, a chest of drawers with one-half of a cement block substituting for a leg, and a tall, portable clothes closet. There also was the body of a short, middle-aged, semi-fat man in the middle of the bed droop.

The man was clothed in a black turtleneck shirt and pale yellow trousers. He wore shoes. The toes of the shoes were turned up and out and Shayne could see the scuffed hole in one sole. A pale yellow coat hung from a knob on the head of the bed. Beside the bed was an empty lettuce crate. It stood on end and supported an open pack of filtered cigarettes, a shell ashtray, and an open bottle of beer with beer still in the neck.

The man might have been asleep—except that the handle of a large pocket knife protruded from his neck just below his Adam's apple and he had leaked

much blood. The blood had browned and had become crusted in some areas.

VIII

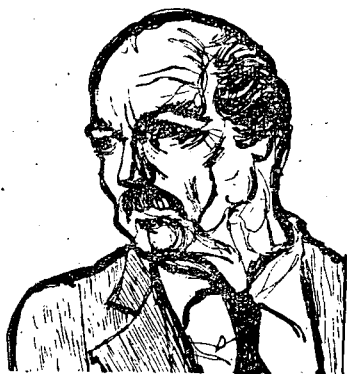
IT WAS no time to get hung in Painter-land. Mike Shayne couldn't answer most of Peter Painter's obvious questions and probably wouldn't answer the remainder. So he didn't even take time to debate. He called in the anonymous tip to the Miami Beach police department from a public pay phone and then he beat it back across the causeway.

He felt at loose ends and restless as he turned Lucy Hamilton's sedan onto Biscayne Boulevard. Rooster—if the man in the bed was Rooster—dead. Why? And who had stuck the knife in the fat man's throat? Sylvester Hondo?

Or perhaps there was no connection between Rooster and the death of Elizabeth Cardinal and/or the sniping at Jackson Ferguson. Perhaps Beady was handing out bum dope these days, anything for a buck.

Shayne slapped the steering wheel and flipped on the radio. The news was on; a guy was bleating about an explosion in a hospital. An oxygen tank had erupted. Shayne grunted. Everybody had problems.

He made a right turn off Biscayne. Headlights behind him



swung around the corner too. He frowned. Did he have a tail? Was Jan Farby playing games again, or had he picked up someone on the Beach? He had been hustling when he had cut from The Silver Arms. He had hit the first pay phone booth and then shot back toward Miami, driving reflexively, lost in his thoughts, not paying any attention to his surroundings—or to anyone who might have developed an interest in him.

He whipped the sedan into the curbing in a No Parking zone and braked suddenly. A station wagon flashed past. It was loaded with surf boards and young people. Shayne sat for a few seconds, drumming fingernails against the steering wheel. How come he was feeling so spooky?

He snorted and drove on to the apartment house, putting Lucy's sedan in his parking slot

behind the building. He'd have to check on the condition of his convertible in the morning—right after he decided whether or not to continue on the case.

Hell, Jan Farby could be out in left field with her murder theory. The sniping at Jackson Ferguson could have been the whim of a nut. And a fat man might have got a knife in the throat because he was unkind to animals.

Shayne sighed and locked the sedan. He suddenly was weary and aching. In fact, his rib area hurt like hell. He put his shoulder blades against the back wall of the self-service elevator and slouched as he rode up. His bed was going to feel good when he got to it.

But his phone was ringing when he unlocked the apartment door.

He scowled as he marched to it. The ringing had a sense of urgency about it, and he had a feeling the ringing had been going on for a long time. He swept up the receiver. "Shayne."

"Well! Good to hear your voice, Mike."

"Like you haven't in the past year, Will?"

"Like we had a little explosion at one of the hospitals a couple of hours ago."

"Yeah, I heard it on the news."

"Your hospital, Mike. Your

room. I figured you were in it. Then a nurse named Willacy told me you ran out on those people this morning. The room, fortunately, was empty."

Shayne's thoughts churned. "I didn't have an oxygen tank in my room, Will."

"I know. We put that out to the newshawks for the time being. We had to give them something. And I sure as the devil wasn't going to tell them some crazy dude pitched a hand grenade under the bed you were supposed to be sleeping in."

"A grenade? For sure?"

"For sure, Mike. And what it did to that room. Wow!"

"Will, not many people knew I was in the hospital. You, Lucy, Jan Farby, the—"

"Only most of the city," Gentry cut in, sighing. "You were on one of the radio newscasts this morning. I heard it: 'Mike Shayne, famed Miami private detective, was hospitalized last night after suffering injuries in a one-car crash on'. . . blah, blah, blah. How do you like being famous?"

Shayne cradled the phone receiver between his ear and his shoulder and lighted a cigarette. "But newshawks don't put room numbers on the air waves."

"A guy called in to the hospital's main desk this morning, said he had a little gift to send over to you. He asked for

the room number and got it. He didn't leave his name, naturally."

"So he just walks in tonight and throws a grenade, huh?"

"You make it sound just like it was, Mike. Simple. He hit during visiting hours. Willacy is the only person who really saw him, and the more she thinks about it the less sure she is. About all she remembers is that he was tall, dark-haired and wore white-white sneakers, white trousers, and a white T shirt.

"She says she only saw his back and that she didn't pay too much attention to him because she thought he was one of the male assistants. But she did see him throw something and start to run toward the fire door. Then boom. All hell broke loose. Willacy doesn't remember anything about the guy after that."

Shayne pulled hard on the cigarette and exhaled a long stream of smoke from his nostrils. "Okay, Will. How are you figuring it?"

"I want you to stay out of sight, Mike, totally out of sight. We haven't put out a damn thing about any victim yet and we're not going to for as long as we can keep the news boys at bay. I want somebody in this town to sweat. You can bet he's got an ear glued to a radio or an eye to a television set, just waiting for the word that Mike Shayne is dead. When he doesn't get that

word, I'm hoping his curiosity will burn him. Maybe he'll call in. I've got a woman on the main switchboard over there."

"Will, have you ever known me to pull in my ears?"

There was a long silence. Shayne smoked. Then Gentry said, "Okay, I tried. I knew it wasn't worth a boot, but I tried. So fire, friend. Who doesn't like you?"

"How 'bout if we just two and two it? I'm Mike Shayne, private investigator. I call out to the Ambrose Cardinal place, get a telephone bum rush. So I drive out, get my brains scrambled by a henchman. How come? I haven't even explained why I'm on Cardinal turf."

"I'll string with you so far, Mike. How come?"

"Maybe guilt complex? Raw nerve ends dangling? Maybe a couple of guys have just pulled off a neat little murder that the police are buying as an accidental drowning. Maybe a couple of guys have been sitting back in fat chairs and patting one another on the back for a couple of days. But then maybe a private detective gets on the phone and jangles the nerve ends."

"Yeah. Maybe."

"So the next morning these same two guys hear on the radio that the private eye is in a hospital, and they get to thinking: 'Hell, this eye could

return, he could get to be a regular damned nuisance, in addition to crying murder to the police. Maybe we'd just better take care of the eye for good."

"A flaw, Mike. The guilt complex and the raw nerve ends didn't hatch with your appearance at the door. Why didn't Hondo kill you last night? He had the golden opportunity, as they say. Dumping a body in the Atlantic is as easy as walking into a hospital and tossing a grenade. Easier."

"Yeah," Shayne admitted, scowling. "Easier, unless tonight was a second thought."

"Fit in the Ferguson sniping," Gentry went on. "I can't buy beating on you just to send you tracking and then going next door and taking a shot at a neighbor. It seems to me that Cardinal and Hondo, even though they might have had Ferguson's death laid out, would have postponed that action. If anything, your play should have scared them off."

"Will, have you ever heard of a small-timer named Rooster? He lived over on the Beach."

"Rooster?" Gentry said carefully. "Yeah, we just got a ticket on him, not ten minutes ago. It came over from Painter. Rooster is—"

"I know," Shayne cut in. "I was there. I saw him."

"And?"

Shayne explained.

"Man, the ground you cover!" Gentry breathed. "But you also left some gaps to be filled. One large gap is, tie Rooster to Cardinal."

Shayne grunted. "Yeah, tie the *Unione Siciliana* to some politicians you know."

"That's what I was afraid of," Gentry sniffed. "Well?"

"Rooster was hired by Cardinal to kill his wife and Ferguson. Rooster got the job done with the wife but missed on Fergy. Meanwhile, I poke my nose in. Hondo steps on me but it is too late to stop Rooster. Second thoughts: get rid of me and Rooster. Seek peace and quiet, especially the quiet. Nobody talks from a grave. Fergy can be taken care of later."

"Mike—"

"Check out Rooster, Will. He supposedly came in here from Sacramento about a year ago, but he may have been in the state before that. Maybe he's pulled some time at Raiford. If he did, see if he and Sylvester Hondo were there at the same time."

"While you're doing what?"

Shayne grinned suddenly. "Getting some shuteye."

IX

WHEN SHAYNE walked into

his office the next morning, Lucy Hamilton was excited.

"Michael!" she burst. "I didn't know someone tried to blow you up!"

"How do you know now, Angel?" he wanted to know. "Gentry was keeping that quiet."

"Willacy! The nurse! She called just a few minutes ago. I'm not sure what she wanted. Reassurance that you are alive, I guess. She sounded—well, confused."

"Did you get her number? I want to talk to her."

"First, you have a visitor in your office."

Shayne stopped in mid-stride. "Who?"

"Mrs. Ferguson. And Jan Farby called. She said not to try to find her at the Hilton today. She was going out. She didn't know where, but she said she'd had enough of looking at four walls."

Shayne pulled on his ear and went on into his office. Audry Ferguson was handsome in a pale green pantsuit and gold flats. But she looked perturbed.

"Mr. Shayne," she said flatly, "I'm beginning to respect you. You have surprising power."

Shayne was puzzled. He sat behind his desk, lighted a cigarette. He offered the package. She shook her head.

"That right?" he said.

"You are investigating the



death of Elizabeth Cardinal, correct?"

"You know I am, Mrs. Ferguson."

"And you think there is a connection between that death and what happened to my husband the other night."

"Up to a certain hour last night," the detective said, "I had some reservations. Now I do not. A couple of things have happened. So to answer your

question bluntly: yes, I think there is a tie between the death of Elizabeth Cardinal and the attempted assassination of your husband."

Audry Ferguson surprised him then. She nodded somberly.

"So do I," she said. "Elizabeth and Jackson were lovers, you know."

"So I've heard."

"I've known for a long time, and I've been afraid for a long time. I'm afraid of Ambrose Cardinal. It's why I want to take Jackson and go to Tokyo. Somewhere inside. Mr. Shayne, I'm angry with my husband. And hurt. But mostly I'm afraid for him. I don't want him to be killed. And I think that Ambrose Cardinal, eventually, will kill him. Ambrose Cardinal is that kind of man. So won't you, please, help us get to Tokyo instead of hindering us?"

"Me? Hindering?" Shayne lifted eyebrows and stared at the woman.

"There has been a delay in our receiving passports," Audry Ferguson said. "I have a suspicion you are the cause of that delay."

"Wrong," Shayne said. "The police are the delay. Specifically, one cop: Will Gentry."

Audry Ferguson contemplated then accepted swiftly. "All right," she nodded. "Can you talk to Mr. Gentry, reason

with him? Can you influence him? I'm willing to pay."

Shayne butted the cigarette. "Pay for what?"

"To be allowed to take my husband to Tokyo. He will be leaving the hospital tomorrow morning."

"You figure I've got some swing with Gentry, huh?"

"I don't know how you will do it, Mr. Shayne. I don't care how. All I want is to be allowed to leave the country tomorrow. If it requires a payoff to you and Mr. Gentry, I'll pay."

"Twenty-five thousand?"

Audry Ferguson didn't even blink. "All right."

"Cash."

She hesitated. White teeth picked at her lower lip. "I'll need a few hours to get cash. Won't a check do?"

"Not in this kind of deal, Mrs. Ferguson," Shayne said. He attempted to look crafty. "I'm sure you understand."

She nodded again, looked disturbed for a moment, then stood.

"Yes, I understand," she said. "You don't want records, naturally."

"Naturally, Mrs. Ferguson," Shayne nodded.

She left the office, and Shayne shook his head. Wow, the misconception some people had about private investigators and policemen. He swept up the

phone and got Will Gentry on the line. He related Audry Ferguson's visit, and then he said, "Try this on for size, Will: she's willing to pay to get her husband out of the country. Does that mean she thinks—or knows—he killed Elizabeth Cardinal?"

"Easy, Mike," Gentry said. "Let me catch up with you."

"Jackson and Elizabeth are lovers, then Jackson decides he wants to end it. But Elizabeth says, 'No end.' She becomes a pest, maybe even threatens Jackson with exposure. So he knocks her off. He could have known Cardinal and Hondo were out of town for a couple of days, known the sister was flying back to Spain on Friday morning. The opportunity was there, Will."

"What about the sniping bit?" Shayne asked.

"Maybe Audry Ferguson is in the deal. Maybe she's an expert shooter. Some women are. Or maybe Jackson hired someone to fake an attempt on his life."

"Hired someone like Rooster?"

"If Jackson hadn't gone to the hospital, I'd say he hired Rooster and then went over to the Beach and made sure the guy would never talk. But it couldn't have been that way, Will. Not with Jackson in a hospital bed. No, Rooster's killing is totally unrelated to all of this. Jackson

hired someone we don't know about."

"And somebody else pitching a hand grenade under your bed is totally unrelated too?"

"It could be."

"Okay, Mike," Gentry signed. "You buy it that way, if you really like it. Meanwhile, I hope it won't be too much of a curve if us cops keep trying to tie all of this into a single package."

Shayne stared at the phone receiver for a moment, then he suddenly laughed. "Thanks, Will."

"Thanks," Gentry sounded surprised.

"I wouldn't be human if I didn't start to boot one once in a while, would I?"

Gentry sighed again. "We live on boots, Mike-me-boy. We eliminate the boots one by one and pretty soon we've got a logical solution to a crime."

"You had any luck on finding out who doesn't like me?"

"Not a smell. No one nosing around the hospital—yet."

"Well, I'm going to run out and have a chat with Mary Willacy. She should have calmed by now. Maybe she'll remember a little more about the guy who walked in and blew up her joint."

Willacy wore a blue bathrobe and blue slippers when she cracked the door to Shayne's rap. Her hair was up in large pink

and blue plastic curlers and for just an instant she looked as if she was wired and tiny electric shoots were going through her, then she recognized the detective and swung the door wide open.

He entered a small, neat apartment living room. She pointed him to a comfortable chair. After he was seated, she bent over him and examined the jagged slash on his forehead.

"That should be dressed, Mr. Shayne," she said professionally.

Shayne grinned. A bath soap scent had filled his nostrils and he would have wagered anyone that all that was underneath the blue bathrobe was Willacy. The girl was cool. Clean. He liked her.

"Willacy," he said, keeping his grin, "I hear you had a little excitement at the hospital last night."

She went across the room to a small coffee table in front of a love seat and picked up an open package of cigarettes. She lighted a cigarette and then tossed the package to the detective. Her look was genuinely curious as she stared on him while smoke trailed from her nostrils.

"You know, Mr. Shayne," she said matter-of-factly, "I read Who-Done-Its for relaxation. I'll bet I've read over a million, but until this very instant no one ever could have convinced me that private detectives like yourself actually exist."

"Tall and dark-haired, Willacy. That wasn't much of a description you gave my friend Gentry."

"Oh, I can do a lot better than that this morning," she conceded. "In fact, I was on the verge of calling Mr. Gentry when you knocked on the door. How 'bout a tattoo? All detectives like tattoos, don't they? Tattoos help solve crimes. At least so I'm told by experts."

"Tattoo? Hmmm." Shayne made a brief show of digesting as he lighted one of Willacy's cigarettes. "Perhaps the tattoo of a fly?" he said without looking up at her.

"V-e-e-r-r-y good, Mr. Shayne! A tattoo of a common house fly. Excellent."

"On the back of the left hand, I'll guess."

"Mr. Shayne, you are absolutely brilliant as a detective—but I do have to confess."

"Confess?"

"I dreamed it," she said simply.

Shayne looked up at her. She was nodding. She pulled on the cigarette, remained sober-faced. "Truth," she said. "Last night, when I got home, when I went to bed, all I could remember was tall, dark-haired and in white, all white. This morning, when I woke up, smoked my first cigarette, I knew the man had a tattoo of a fly on the back of his

left hand. Do you want to call the booby wagon now?"

Shayne stood. "I'd rather kiss you, Willacy."

"You hadn't better do that, Mr. Shayne," she said, shaking her head. "Not that I'd scream, but I know a certain secretary who would if she ever found out."

Shayne headed for her door. "Mr. Shayne?"

He grinned at her over his shoulder.

"I've helped?"

He winked at her.

"Well—" she said. She suddenly shuffled a little and her eyes wouldn't meet his. She bent and stabbed the cigarette in an ashtray on the coffee table. "I don't want to wish you any bad luck," she said while still bent. "But if you ever get beat up again, ask for my floor. Sixth West. I like taking care of you. You're exciting."

Shayne trotted down steps and out of the building. Will Gentry's sedan was at the curbing and Gentry was halfway across the sidewalk when the detective hit the sunshine. Gentry was alone.

"I thought I might get in on the quiz session," Gentry said. "Too late, huh?"

"At the moment, I want Sylvester Hondo," Shayne said grimly.

"For sure?"

"No doubt."

"Click, click," said Gentry.

Shayne blinked. "What the hell does that mean?"

"Hondo and Rooster were at Raiford at the same time a few years ago. They were cellmates."

"Click, click," said Shayne, striding off toward Lucy Hamilton's sedan.

X

WILL GENTRY trailed Mike Shayne out to the Cardinal estate. They braked at the top of the horseshoe drive and vacated the cars. The sun was bright and hot. Shayne squinted against the glare. The grounds were immaculate and uninhabited, the mansion stood silent, windows and doors closed. There were no other cars in sight.

Shayne frowned. "The place looks vacated, Will."

"If nobody's home, I've got a man on them," Gentry said. "I put them under surveillance early this morning. I had a hunch about someone who might have made a hospital visit, someone who is tall and dark-haired."

Shayne and the detective chief started around the cars and then were hailed: "Chief?"

A bulky man came up the driveway. He was red-faced and looked worried as he hustled along.

"Nobody here, Chief," he said

as he approached. He was breathing hard, wheezing. "And Billings lost them going downtown. I just heard on the car radio. We've got an All-Cars out on them now."

"Damn it," Gentry snapped.

His man shuffled. "They're in a Linc. Hondo is drivin'."

They cut from here about twenty minutes ago."

"Could they be going after Jackson Ferguson in the hospital, Will?" Shayne asked.

"If they are, they're desperate. And why would they be that desperate? Hell, Mike, they could be going downtown to a movie for all we know."

"Well, I'm going over there," Shayne said, sliding back inside Lucy Hamilton's sedan.

Gentry again trailed him and in his rear view mirror Shayne could see the detective chief using his car radio as they rolled along the quiet street of the luxurious neighborhood. Suddenly Gentry leaned on his horn and waved. Shayne pulled into a curbing and Gentry moved up beside.

"The Fergusons have checked out of the hospital," Gentry yelled through the open windows. "About an hour ago."

Shayne grunted and pulled out. He stopped at the first pay phone booth and called in to his office. Lucy Hamilton said Mrs. Ferguson had not returned with

money but that there was a man in the office who wanted money.

"Someone named Beady," she said as if she was wrinkling her nose against an offensive odor.

"Put him on, Angel."

There was a pause and then Beady's gritty voice was in the detective's ear. "Mike?"

"What have you got, Beady?"

"It's big this time, Mike. Worth plenty of bread."

"Un-huh."

"More'n nine. I gotta have—at least twenty."

"Let's hear."

"You hear about Rooster?"

"I know about him, yeah."

"You talk to him?"

"No."

"You still interested in him?"

"Maybe."

"If'n you're still interested in him, I gotta have twenty-five. The ante just went up."

"Beady—" Shayne said, putting a threat in his voice.

"About a week ago, Mike," Beady said swiftly, "Rooster had a meet with a dame."

"So?"

"An aristo-cat."

"Huh?"

"A dame with flash, Mike. Polish. An uptown dame. Yuh know, big shiny car, the works."

"I've got the picture, yeah, but—"

"Yuh know Mousey?"

The detective didn't know Mousey.

"Well, Rooster and Mousey, thebeen sorta—well, yuh know, Mike. Hell, I can't say anything with this youngster sittin' here sniffin' at me!"

"Is Mousey female, Beady?" Shayne scowled.

"Yeah, whatcha think?"

"Okay, so I've got it. Mousey and Rooster, kind of like Frankie and Johnny, huh?"

"Who's them cats?"

"Just tell me about Mousey and Rooster, pal," Shayne said patiently.

"I'm tryin' to, but yuh keep interruptin'! Mousey and Rooster, they're so'n so, yuh know? But then Rooster has this meet with the flash from uptown and Mousey she takes the nosedive. She's been in the vino since. I run into her last night. She don't even know Rooster is dead, and she's cryin'. She's cryin' 'bout Rooster and the flash, blubberin' all over—"

"Did she see the meet, Beady?"

"So—she says. Says she tailed Rooster down the street and saw him get into this shiny heap, saw—"

"Where can I find Mousey?"

"Now?"

"Now."

"Man, I dunno. Maybe she's still at The Ringadoor. That's on 74th West. That's where I seen her last night. She looked pretty anchored when I seen her."



"And if someone threw her out to close up?"

"Okay, I hear she's got an old panel out back. Vacant lot or something. An old panel sits there. No wheels, no motor. Mousey's supposed to have a bed in the back end."

"Okay, Beady, put Angel on."

"Who?"

"Sniffing Girl."

"Oh, her. Here she is. When do I get my twenty-five?"

"When I talk to Angel."

"She's on the horn, pal!"

XI

MIKE SHAYNE put Lucy Hamilton's sedan in a municipal parking lot and got into the official sedan so that he and Gentry could talk while going out to 74th Street.

"Did Rooster meet with Audry Ferguson?" he asked, throwing the idea out for a starter.

Gentry sniffed. "She hires Rooster to knock off Mrs. Cardinal? How would she even know where to start? Audry

Ferguson and Rooster are not exactly on the same social planes, Mike."

"But it's been done before, Will."

"Yeah," he said thoughtfully, "damnit, it has. Okay, so she hires Rooster for a kill. That takes us to the sniping. Where does that fit?"

"Let's speculate," said Shayne, tugging at his ear. "She hires Rooster at a set price. Let's say ten-thousand dollars. Okay, Rooster does his job. But then he gets greedy. He figures Audry Ferguson can be milked. So he goes for a little blackmail. She balks. So Rooster gets out a rifle. Not to kill Jackson Ferguson, just to scare hell out of Audry Ferguson, let her know what kind of man she's been dealing with, the only trouble being of course, Rooster doesn't really know what kind of woman he's dealing with. She goes out, buys a pocket knife in any store—you could scour this town for ten years, Will, and not find a clerk who specifically remembers selling a plain, ordinary pocket knife to a woman named Audry Ferguson—and she goes around to Rooster's place and sticks the knife in his throat. "Take that, Mr. Blackmailer!"

"And today she wants to go to Tokyo?"

"Today she has a reason for Tokyo," Shayne nodded.

"I have to think about it, Mike."

"So do I," admitted Shayne. "But it's food. Here's The Ringadoor. Fancy, huh?"

"It looks like it should have a vacant lot out back," Gentry grunted.

Once, the panel truck had been black and sparkling, probably someone's pride and joy. Today is sat rusty and slightly tilted on its axles, paint and window glass gone. Shayne poked his head through one of the rear openings, Gentry used the other. They stared on a woman who probably was thirty but who looked fifty and quite used.

She sat on a thin, tattered mattress, her back braced against a side of the truck. She wore faded bluejeans, tattered tennies and a man's blue shirt. Her hair looked like a straw stack after a wind storm. She was smoking a cigarette and staring morosely at an empty wine bottle at her feet.

"Beat it," she mumbled. Her voice was dead.

"Rooster," the redhead said flatly.

The woman sneezed, looked up. Her eyes were hollow pits.

"Fuzz," she sneered.

"Friendly fuzz, Mousey," said Shayne.

"So go find yourself a blonde cat, friendly fuzz. I don't know nothing about a killin'—only that

Rooster is dead. Killed. And she done it."

"Rooster had a meet with a blonde? Tell us about her, Mousey. Was she tall or short, fat or—"

"Blonde. Tha's all I know. I seen her in a fancy car. I seen Rooster pile into the car. I couldn't see no more. It was dark. They drove off. But I know she was blonde."

"When was this?"

"Sometime early last week, or maybe it was two weeks ago. I dunno. I can't keep days straight no more. How come Rooster had to get killed? He was good to me. He bought me ham'n eggs once in a while, kept me goin'."

Shayne dropped a five dollar bill to the floor of the panel truck.

Inside the official sedan, Gentry drummed fingernails on the steering wheel. "A blonde, huh? Mrs. Ferguson is a brunette, but she could own a shopful of wigs, I suppose."

Shayne was tugging on his ear.

"Let's take a run out to the airport," he said thoughtfully.

Gentry gave him a sharp look then started the car motor. They checked out all of the European flights for Friday, August 6, and discovered that a J. Farby, a blonde, had had a reservation on a five forty-five Madrid flight, but that J. Farby had not shown up for takeoff. They checked the

logs for August 7. No J. Farby's.

"She didn't have to use her own name, Will," Shayne said flatly.

"If she killed and cut, why come back, Mike? Why cry murder? She had clear sailing. We'd written off the sister's death to accidental drowning. In fact, why did she kill?"

Shayne called Jason Paniel and discovered the attorney was two days ahead of him. "Call it curiosity, Mr. Shayne. Call it a hunch. I don't know. Something made me investigate. I don't have a complete accounting, of course. Banks are not prone to handing out that kind of information, even to an attorney.

"However, I now know that Elizabeth Cardinal was in excellent financial condition. Much of her money was tied up in ventures of her husband's making, but they appear to be solid ventures. There will be profit. On the other hand, Miss Farby is—well, not broke, but let's say she is just solvent and that's all."

"And she inherits from her sister, right?"

"Yes."

"Counselor, did Miss Farby offer you any explanation about how she learned of her sister's death?"

"She didn't have to, Mr. Shayne. I phoned her in Madrid. I talked to her last Sunday morning."

"Sunday, huh? And in Madrid?"

"Yes. Actually I placed the call Saturday afternoon. I heard about Elizabeth Cardinal's death on the radio Saturday morning. For a while, I assumed Mr. Cardinal would call Miss Farby, then I began to wonder. So I placed a call."

"But you didn't talk to her until Sunday?"

"I left a number. She returned my call. It was Sunday morning, Madrid time. She said she had been visiting over Saturday night and had just returned to her apartment."

"Did she sound as if she already knew about the death?"

"No. She was surprised and of course shocked."

"Okay, thanks, counselor."

"Mr. Shayne—?"

But Shayne hung up on the attorney.

"We've got motive, Will," he said grimly.

They found Jan Farby nervous and pacing the front room of a top floor suite at the Hilton. She was dressed and smoking a tiny cigar. She seemed mildly surprised by their presence and then she invited them into the suite and resumed the pacing.

"I've already had my morning walk, gentlemen," she said, "and now I'm cooped up again. These walls are closing in on me. What does one do in Miami?"

"You could always fly back to Madrid," Shayne said.

She stopped pacing and stared at him briefly. Then she agreed. "Yes," she nodded, "I suppose I could."

"You can afford it now."

She stared again. "I sense something sinister in that remark, Mr. Shayne."

"You inherit from your sister," he said flatly. "It puts you on your feet again, Miss Farby. Financially."

Her eyes darted from the redhead to the silent Gentry, back to Shayne. "What is this?"

"You had it sewed up, honey," Shayne said. "Sister dead, inheritance coming in. You could live another few years in the European waterholes. You got away with murder. Will, here, was happy with the accidental drowning ruling. So why did you return and sic me on Ambrose Cardinal? That's the puzzler."

Jan Farby had paled. "Mr. Shayne, you're crazy!"

"Am I? Well, Rooster isn't. He's half dead, but he isn't crazy. He's talking sense and he's saying—"

"Rooster is dead!" Jan Farby shrilled suddenly. "I heard on television!"

Shayne wagged his head. "You heard what was put on television, honey. Cops work in devious ways sometimes. They don't always tell the newshawks

everything. Rooster is alive, just kicking, but he can talk. And he doesn't like what's happened to him. Incidentally, how do you know Rooster?"

"He came to the house once to see Sylv—" Jan Farby clipped off the words and glared. She looked uncertain, yet defiant.

"Okay," Shayne shrugged. "Well, let's take a run over to the hospital. Maybe with you and Rooster together we can—"

"Ambrose hired Rooster to kill Elizabeth!" Jan Farby burst. "Don't you see it? He was insanely angry over her affair with Jackson Ferguson! Rooster was to kill both of them! But when he missed Jackson Ferguson, Ambrose had Sylvester kill Rooster to keep him quiet! Sylvester will do anything for Ambrose!"

"Problem, Miss Farby. You should have stuck around long enough to make sure Rooster was dead after you put that knife in his throat."

"Whatever he says, he's a damned liar!" she screamed.

"And there's the matter of a J. Farby who did not show up for a Madrid flight last Friday morning. J. Farby, it seems, flew to Madrid on Saturday under another name, which is why an attorney who placed a call to J. Farby on Saturday afternoon did not have the call returned until Sunday."

"Ambrose did it!" Jan Farby shrilled, stomping a foot. Her face was livid and her muscles had become knots. "Liz was an infidel! Ambrose found out!"

"Not," Shayne said, wagging his head again, "according to Rooster."

Jan Farby bolted. She shot toward the door. Shayne reached out a large hand and captured her, spinning her into his front. He held her clamped. "And just where the devil are you off too?" he growled.

"To kill Ambrose!" she hissed. "I should have in the beginning!"

"Do a better job than you did with Rooster, honey."

"Oh, I'll make sure this time, Mr. Shayne! You can bet on that!"

Silence followed. Shayne and the girl remained clamped, staring deep into each others eyes. The only sound was the hiss of their breathing. And then the redhead saw the manila-colored eyes begin to change. They rounded slightly, narrowed down. It was as if they were refocusing. Jan Farby shuddered all over suddenly, and then went limp. She sagged against Shayne's front.

"You okay?" he asked after several seconds.

She quivered. He held her off. She wouldn't look at him, didn't move. Finally she said softly, "I

had to have the money and Liz was—throwing it away. Ambrose made her that way. He made her an alcoholic so he could get into her accounts. When she was drunk, she would sign anything. He got her to sign papers to finance his investments. That way he wasn't risking his own money. He was taking from her, from us.

"We were sisters. Liz would have helped me...once she would have helped me. Father would have wanted it that way. But Ambrose changed her. He made her a drunk, took away her sense of awareness, her love...I had to stop him. If I could kill Liz and make him the murderer—" She hesitated, then suddenly looked up and stared straight into Shayne's eyes. "Well, I could salvage something," she said.

"Are you and Sylvester in this thing together, doll?" he asked.

She looked mildly startled. Then she stuttered, "N-no."

XII

JAN FARBY had been booked on a charge of homicide, and Jason Paniel was out looking for the best defense attorney in the city. Mike Shayne had called Lucy Hamilton at his office and had found her stewing over whether or not to accept \$25,000 in cash from Audry

Ferguson. Mrs. Ferguson had the cash stacked on Lucy's desk. Shayne had talked to Audry Ferguson on the telephone and told her to spend the \$25,000 in Tokyo—except that she really didn't have to go to Japan now; the sniper was dead and his employer jailed.

The case was closed. It had been closed with a lie, but it was closed. The only trouble was Shayne was wrestling with an elusive, dangling end.

He scowled across Will Gentry's desk.

"Where in hell does Sylvester Hondo and his grenade fit?" he wanted to know.

Gentry's phone jangled. He answered, listened, grunted a couple of times, then said, "Okay, hang tight, Sergeant. We're just in the process of closing the Cardinal file."

Gentry put the phone together and sat staring at Shayne for a few seconds. Then he said, "Something tells me not to tell you this, but my people found Cardinal and Hondo downtown. Spotted them in the Lincoln. But they've split. Hondo's in a bar on Biscayne, Cardinal cut out in the Lincoln."

Shayne found Hondo sitting alone and nursing a Scotch at the bar. The lounge was small, quiet, dim. There were two girls giggling softly in a corner booth and a heavy man who looked like

a tired banker at the opposite end of the bar. No other customers.

"Oh, God," breathed Hondo, but he didn't flick a muscle, not even to drink.

Shayne ordered cognac and an icewater chaser. "I owe you, Sylvester."

"Do you?" Hondo shrugged morosely.

"A hand grenade. That's pretty drastic."

"You were a threat to Mr. Cardinal. His wife is just dead, just buried in the ground, then a private snooper comes nosin'. That's a threat."

"So you take a chance on Raiford again?"

"Who's gonna prove what, shamus?"

"Yeah, but to take that chance for another guy, Sylvester? It's still drastic."

Hondo shrugged. "It's the way it was between me'n Mr. Cardinal."

"Was?"

"Yeah."

"You're sounding low."

"I am low. He just fired me. About an hour ago."

"Cardinal fired you? How come?"

"For throwin' the grenade. I just told him this afternoon."

"Hmm."

"Figure it, will yuh, shamus, and then let me know how it comes out. I'm protectin' him, and he fires me."

"Perhaps Mr. Cardinal is not a man of violence, after all."

"Him? Violence? He picks mosquitoes off his arm and frees them. That's how violent Mr. Cardinal is. How comes you think he had me around?"

"Well, Hondo, I still owe you."

"Hey! What happened to Sylvester?"

"I don't know. There's something about calling a guy a Christian name and then whaling hell out of him."

"That's what you're figurin' on doin', huh?"

"It's what."

"Well, you better get whalin', cause the cop is movin' in from the other end of the bar."

Shayne turned on the stool. The heavy man smiled, flashed a shield. "Chief Gentry said to give you five minutes to use any way you wanted to use them, Mr. Shayne, then to bring in Hondo. Your five are up."



Madness was in her, and
Murder. But — she was my
daughter. Somehow I must...

FALL OUT ONE

by
THOMAS
N.
SCORTIA



ROSE CRIED, "Oh, my God, Jim! What are we going to do?"

"Shut up," Major Ancher said. "Shut up and let me think." He ran his thick fingers through his thinning red-yellow hair.

He had spent the last twenty-four hours at Battalion Headquarters in an

administrative exercise and his green uniform was limp-looking while his face showed the distinct shadow of a beard. His eyes were cold, very cold and completely unhorrorified as he took in the sight of the dead boy, sprawled on the couch, his teeshirt a mass of blood.

The scissors had made a

jagged wound just under the sternum. They lay, red and menacing, on the floor where he had dropped them after wrenching them from the wound.

Suzanne sat in the corner, drawn half into a fetal position. She wasn't sobbing, but a slow ooze of tears trickled from her eyes. Her lower lip was thrust out petulantly and Rose realized how child-like she looked in spite of her near-twenty years. Her fingers idly traced a pattern in the design of her dress. She seemed completely oblivious to the emotional state of her parents.

"Why the hell did you allow him in here anyway?" Major Ancher demanded, sinking into the barrel chair and staring at the sprawled corpse of the boy.

The boy was in his late teens with long blue-black hair, the stubble of a dark beard and the vague suggestion of a new mustache. He wore blue jeans, a tee shirt that had once been white and sandals. He did not look particularly clean.

"I didn't allow him in here," Rose postested. "I went out to the PX to shop for groceries. Linda was staying with Suzanne. She must have met the boy here and gone on some errand, leaving him with Suzanne.

"Oh, God," he said. That means she'll be coming back."

"Well, Linda is usually pretty dependable. She was supposed to stay with Suzanne 'til ten."

"We've got to get busy," Major Ancher said. He began to remove his semi-dress blouse. He loosened his tie and started for the kitchen.

"Jim," Rose said, "we've got to call the provost marshal."

"Don't be stupid," he said. "Have it all over the post. You know what that means."

"But the boy's dead," she persisted.

"That," Major Ancher said with a faint sneer, "is patently obvious."

He disappeared into the kitchen, returned carrying a plastic table cloth and walked without speaking into the bedroom. After some minutes he returned in green fatigue uniform and combat boots. Suzanne looked up from her corner, her young-old eyes filled with delight.

"Oh, Daddy," she said. "Can I go with you?"

"No, baby," Major Ancher said tiredly. "No, you can't."

"Oh," she said petulantly. "I know, you're mad at me." She rose slowly to her feet, her maturing body still clumsy in spite of her well-developed musculature.

My God, Rose thought, *she's such a beautiful girl. If only...*

"I had to do it," Suzanne said

petulantly. "He wasn't nice at all and I had to do it. I didn't really mean to hurt him."

"Of course, you didn't," Major Ancher said gently. He looked intense, protective. There was another look in his eyes, Rose saw, a look she hadn't seen in a long time.

"Daddy will handle everything," he said. "You go to bed, baby."

"All right," Suzanne said and walked from the room, pausing at the door to look back in pathetic appeal. It was a terribly touching look, Rose thought. Who knows what some unsophisticated young man might not make out of that look?

"What are you going to do?" she asked her husband.

"I'm going to load him in the car and dump him," Major Ancher said.

"You can't do that," she protested. "It isn't right."

He whirled on her, his eyes angry.

"Don't tell me what isn't right," he snapped. "This little creep molests my daughter and we find him dead. He's nothing, do you hear?"

"He's dregs, just like a thousand others like him. I won't have his worthless death wreck my career. I've worked too long to come back."

"What about his family?" she

asked. "They'll know where he is."

"I know them," Major Ancher said contemptuously. "The old man's a GS-9 at Post. Typical civil service type. He couldn't give a damn where his worthless son is tonight."

She looked at the boy's sprawling body, thinking somehow that Major Ancher shouldn't be saying such things about the poor crumpled creature who had bled out his life so recently.

"If anyone asks, he wasn't here when you came back," Major Ancher continued. "I'll load him in the car and carry him out to Anzio Area."

"That's the artillery impact area," she said.

"That's right," he smirked. "I think that's pretty clever. They don't send a sapper detail out there for duds more than twice a year. When they find him, they'll think he wandered into the area... maybe high on something, one of the training shoots got him."

She shuddered.

"I think that's horrible," she said.

"You don't know what horror is," he said, wrapping the boy's body in the plastic tablecloth. He hefted the burden and turned.

"I'll be back in an hour," he said. "You clean up this mess. If Linda comes before I get back,

play it stupid." He glared at her fiercely. "That shouldn't be too hard," he said.

She heard him go down the back stairs and she stood at the window until his car bloomed lights in the yard below. Seconds later he drove out into the street, moving slowly past the town houses of the Wherry project. Most of them were darkened and there seemed little chance that he would be seen.

She returned to the living room with a pan of water, sponge, detergent and ammonia. After ten minutes of futile scrubbing, she realized that she would not be able to remove all the traces of blood. She went into the bedroom and returned with a white viscose throw rug which she arranged before the couch, placing the coffee table on the rug. Then she went to the wet bar by the window and made herself a strong whiskey and water. Her hands were still shaking visibly. She finished the drink quickly and in rapid succession had two more. The heat of the alcohol spread through her being but did nothing to dampen the chill that had invaded her limbs.

They had been so happy when Suzanne was born, she remembered. They had wanted children so badly and Jim particularly had wanted a girl. She was born just six months

before he went overseas. That was just before the Inchon invasion, she recalled, and he had arrived in Seoul just in time for it. Then followed the incredible days when the whole North Korean front had collapsed and MacArthur's forces had pursued them north, fighting for every hill, to the Yalu River. It was that Christmas that the two great tragedies had come upon her. First the doctors had told her about Suzanne. They had suspected for a long time that she might be retarded, but the tests had now confirmed it. Well, it was something she could have lived with: having a child daughter forever.

Then came Christmas and the crushing Chinese attack across the Yalu. Jim had been captured the second day of the attack. It had been two years before he was finally repatriated in one of the prisoner exchanges and another year before he was finally released from the hospital at Carson. They had done terrible things to him, trying vainly to get him to sign a germ warfare confession. The marks of that ordeal had remained, buried perhaps, but there deep within him.

She had been kind and understanding and, if his temper flared unreasonably or if he sank at times into almost suicidal depressions, she knew that

eventually he would find his own personal stability. She had been frightened, of course, when he was passed over for promotion several times and he had fastened his hate first on one and then another superior for his failure, sometimes making wild threats of reprisals. It was a terrible period, she remembered, but the terror was nothing compared to that she now felt.

She shivered, trying to rid her mind of the image of the boy, sprawled in the welter of his own blood.

When she heard the footsteps on the front stoop, she thought it must be her husband returning. She consulted her watch and realized that he must still be on his return trip...that she could not possibly expect him for at least another fifteen minutes. She heard the front door rattle and open against the chain she had affixed earlier.

"Who's that?" she demanded.

"It's Linda," a girl's voice said. "I didn't realize you would be back so soon, Mrs. Ancher."

"The PX closed early. It's inventory time," Rose said, wondering at the inanity of the reply. She walked to the door and released the chain. Linda, a small girl with sun-streaked blonde hair came in and said, "I'm sorry. I had to run an errand, but Ron said he'd stay with Suzanne."



"Ron?" Rose said, trying to sound casual. "Who is Ron?"

"My boy friend," Linda said. "Isn't he here?"

"No one's here," Rose said, realizing that her voice sounded strange and unreal. "There was no one here when I got home. Suzanne was in bed."

The girl's face dropped.

"Oh, that's terrible," she said. "He promised he wouldn't leave her alone. I told him I'd be back by ten."

"Well, dear," Rose said, "why don't you go home and get some sleep? I'm sure he'll call you later tonight or tomorrow."

"I suppose so," Linda said. "Could I use your phone?"

"Oh," Rose began, trying to find some excuse for refusing.

"I'll only be a moment," Linda said, brushing past her and going into the kitchen where a bright yellow phone was suspended from the wall above

the counter. Rose heard her dial and wait for a long while before replacing the instrument. She came into the living room and said, "He isn't home. There's nobody home."

"Well, I'm sure he'll call you," Rose said, feeling intense panic. She had to get the girl out of the house before —

"Oh, Mamma, is that Linda?" Suzanne asked, coming in from the hall rubbing her eyes.

"Yes, it's Linda, Suzanne," Linda said, her voice soft.

"I bet you're looking for Ronnie," Suzanne said. "You won't find him."

"No, he isn't here," Linda said.

"Suzanne, go back to your room!" Rose realized that her voice had risen almost to a screech.

"Ronnie's sick," Suzanne said, her voice light and sweet, her eyes terribly vacant.

"She's tired," Rose said, taking her daughter by the hand. "Come on, baby. Let's go to bed."

"No," Linda objected. "What does she mean, Ronnie's sick?"

"He was bad to me and I hit him and he's sick," Suzanne said. "Daddy took him away."

"She's had a bad dream," Rose said, choking back a sob.

Linda brushed past her, suddenly alert. She surveyed the living room and her eyes lighted

on the new rug. She knew this room well and was positive it had not been there before. The girl suddenly bent over before the couch and pulled up the end of the throwrug. The carpet underneath was a faint pink. It was then that she saw the scissors, partly concealed. Her hand probed under the coach and emerged with them, their blades a dull red-brown.

"Oh," Linda cried and then her face turned dark. "What happened to Ron?" she demanded of Rose. Her eyes were wide and filled with fear. "What happened, Mrs. Ancher?" she demanded.

"Nothing's happened to your Ron," Major Ancher's bull voice said as he came in from the kitchen. "What makes you think anything has happened to your boy friend?"

"I left him here while I went on an errand," Linda said. Suzanne said he was sick and that you took him away and now..." She held up the scissors. "What have you done with him. Please, tell me," she cried, her voice breaking.

"Lock the door, Rose," Major Ancher said intensely.

"No," Rose said. "Jim, you don't know what you're doing. Everyone knows Suzanne's retarded. They won't do anything to her."

"Lock the door," he said

fiercely, whirling on her. His eyes were wide, his pupils dilated. Rose felt sudden fear clutch at her.

"No, you can't — You can't," she sobbed.

"Everything I worked for," he said. "I've seen other men, incompetent brown-nosing men get the credit for my work. Do you think I'm going to accept this? Lock the door." The last words were almost a shout.

Rose paused, her fright almost overwhelming her. "Linda," she cried. "Oh, for God's sake, Linda, run!"

Linda stared at her and then at Major Ancher, her face suddenly blooming with knowledge. "Oh, no, Ron..." she sobbed. Major Ancher started for her, stumbled as his toe hooked on the edge of the living room carpet and in the next instant she bolted through the hall and the front door slammed behind her.

"You fool, to throw away everything."

"Jim," she pleaded, "Jim, you couldn't have —"

"What's one more or less?" he said, weaving on his feet. "They won't rob me of it again. What's

one more or less? It's fall out one, just like with the gooks. Kill one and another rises to take his place. They're just faces, nothing more."

"There's only one way out," she said, recovering herself. She walked purposefully into the kitchen to the phone and pulled the instrument from the hook. He had followed her and in a second he was beside her, wresting the instrument from her hand. With one tug, he ripped the wire from the wall mounting and threw the phone on the floor.

"I can't let you," he said. His eyes were wide and unseeing. "I can't let you do it," he said in a distant emotionless voice.

She looked into his eyes and horror overwhelmed her at what she saw there.

"Oh, Jim, Jim," she sobbed as his heavy deadly hands reached out for her.

"They'll never believe a fool girl," he said thickly. "There's only one. . ."

She screamed and beat him away. He stood, menacing, in the middle of her dissolving world.

She ran into the night, the terrible black night.

THE COMIC BOOKS MURDER

He had three incredible nuts to help him crack a murder. Three real nuts—and an extremely nosy wife.



by RICHARD O'BRIEN

THE FIRST impression Irving Mandelowitz had, after fumbling open the door, was that he was staring at a very rainy face.

All things considered—the fact that it was five A.M., and that Irving had just been wrenched from a sleep so deep and dreamless it would have done credit to an ox—all things considered, it wasn't that ridiculous a first impression. Particularly when, a second later, Irving was fully aware that it was a face surrounded by a rainstorm. One hell of a rainstorm, Irving noted.

The face, having waited a

decent interval for Irving to say something, spoke. "Our phone," it said, "I'm sorry—out of order."

Irving took note of that, at the same time that he watched, with a kind of abstracted fascination, the cascade of rivulets coursing down the face. Then, instinctively, "Come in, come in. You'll get awfully wet if you stay out there." No sense trying to preserve the last shreds of sleep, Irving decided, sadly, and allowed himself to come fully awake.

The face entered, thankfully.

Murder by the Book! Comic Book that is!



"I'm awfully sorry. My name's Gresham. Kenneth Gresham." There was anguish in his rain-streaked features. "Our phone's out of order. I've got to call the police. A murder."

"Is everything all right?" Irving heard Marsha call down the stairs. He turned around and saw her, her robe pulled about her, staring intently, a hint of a furrow disturbing her usually smooth brow.

Irving liked to look at her from a distance. It was a bit of a game he played with himself, as if from a distance he could see her objectively, almost for the first time. She looked terrific, he judged. If she wasn't already his, he'd very much want to go after her.

"It's okay," he yelled, eyeing her legs as he might a Gauguin. "Just a murder."

Irving turned to Gresham. "You did say it was a murder?"

"Yes, but I—"

"I'm sorry," said Irving, immediately contrite about the discomfiture he saw in Gresham. "My big mouth. What's happened? I must say I don't ever remember seeing you before."

Irving thought over those last few words, and moved a little nearer to the brass lamp on the hall table. He tried to decide which end he should grasp.

"No, I—We're—that is, we're

just visiting, four of us, your neighbor, Clifford Willey."

"It's not Mr. Willey?"

"I'm afraid it is."

"Oh, my." That was an odd phrase, coming out of him, Irving reflected. "Oh, my". Weak, rather, and certainly devoid of any weakness. No sympathy there, no feeling of solidity, or reassurance.

Irving began to get the disappointing feeling that when it came to an out of the ordinary occasion he might not be up to responding to it.

"Mr. Willey has been murdered?" It was Marsha speaking, as she joined them there in the hall.

"Yes. Please, I must phone—"

Irving snapped to. "Certainly. Come on." He strode to the kitchen, a little crab-like, the better to keep an eye on Gresham. Just in case.

In the kitchen, he picked up the phone. There was no sound. He dialed. There was no sound. He clicked the receiver a couple of times, knowing that there was no point, but that it was something one had to do. He then dialed again, once, twice. No sound. He looked at Gresham and it was surprising how normal everything felt, considering that this was becoming a very creepy moment.

"Our phone's out too," he said.

"The storm must have done

it. I'll turn on the radio," Marsha said, moving toward their large transistor. "Why don't you make a cup of coffee for Mr.—"

"Resham?"

"Gresham. Kenneth Gresham."

"For Mr. Gresham, and you can talk while I listen to the radio."

Gresham waved his hand. "I must get to the police. If you could tell me where—"

Irving shrugged, smiling. "I'm sorry. That's why she's got the radio on. With a storm like this, if the telephone's out, there's a good chance the road is gone too. It happened last year."

"Well, I—we've got to do something?"

"Do you know who killed him?"

Gresham's chin twitched, just a little. "No. We think an intruder. We don't know."

"An intruder, hm?" Irving turned and locked the back door. So far Marsha had been able to locate nothing but static.

"All the stations must be off the air now. Too early," he said to her. "Look, why don't you get dressed, and bring me a shirt and my shoes, and we'll all pile into the car and try the road. I'm not too thrilled about taking you along, but I'm not leaving you alone with any—intruders."

Marsha acceded, carrying the transistor with her, fiddling with

the dial as she went. Irving followed after her, into the hall, keeping an eye on the front door, just in case. He felt he should be holding some sort of weapon, but with Gresham there, he felt a trifle embarrassed about getting anything, that it would look a little melodramatic, be too much of a flourish, silly-looking, really.

"What happened, anyway?" he asked.

"I don't know," Gresham said, still looking very damp. "I thought I heard a noise while I was sleeping. Anyway, I woke up. I was on my way to the bathroom, across the hall, when I happened to look down the stairs. And I saw—well it looked like a lump, actually, a dark lump near the front door. I kept telling myself that's all that it was, right up almost until I was two or three feet away. Even then, I had to search around and turn on the hall light to be absolutely sure."

"It was Mr. Willey?"

"Yes. He was all sort of huddled up, this big, broken flashlight near him, the glass all over the place. No blood at all. Just this sort of black place near his temple."

"He was already dead?"

"Oh, yes. I'd never seen anyone dead before, but I knew. He couldn't have been anything else."

"What'd you do then?"

Gresham looked shamefaced.

"I screamed."

"Really?" The way Gresham looked, that scream must have made him feel as silly as "Oh, my" had me, Irving decided. "Screamed?"

"Yes. I don't know why, but I did. Really loud. Then everyone else just sort of came tumbling down the stairs."

"Here're your shirt and shoes." Marsha had returned, handing the clothes to Irving as she reached into the closet for their raincoats.

"Thanks", Irving said. "Mr. Gresham's just been telling me about the murder. Someone hit Willey with a flashlight, it seems. That right?"

"Yes. That's what it looked like."

"Were there any clues?" Marsha asked. She didn't look the least bit afraid. Irving hoped she was just putting up a front, as he suddenly found himself shivering. And it wasn't all that cold.

"I don't know." Gresham brushed his long blond hair back, a small spray being sent off as he did so. "We tried to phone, and when that didn't work, I decided to drive down here to ask to use yours."

"Let's go," said Irving, opening the door, then locking it behind them. No sense making

things too easy for any lurking intruder. He took a few steps and stopped. Even through the driving rain, there was no mistaking what he saw down the road.

"What's the matter?" Marsha called, turning, seeing him rooted on the walk.

"I didn't hear that fall," said Irving, pointing to the huge oak that now completely crossed the narrow country road, the only avenue between them and the nearest town or house.

"What'll we do now?" asked Gresham, the visitor asking the informed, experienced native.

"I don't know", Irving responded. "I guess we might as well go on up to Mr. Willey's. The late Mr. Willey's. There's certainly nothing else we can do just now."

THEY GOT into Gresham's car, a two-door American-made model. Irving didn't pay much attention to the make of cars. He liked the interior, though. It was nice and clean. The seat accomodated his long, lean frame nicely, the whole interior contrasting comfortably with the whipping downpour outside. He settled back into the seat, relaxing.

"Are you a relative of Mr. Willey's?" he asked.

"No," said Gresham, driving slowly, cautiously, through the

torrential curtain of rain. "We are all—well, not friends, exactly."

"Business?"

"No." Gresham glanced at Irving and Marsha, briefly. "We're all collectors. Comic book collectors."

Irving wondered if Marsha also suddenly had the feeling they were riding with a tall, blonde, very wet homicidal maniac. "Comic book collectors?"

"Yes," Gresham said, looking just a tiny bit uncomfortable. "Maybe you've read about us. There've been a lot of stories. There are thousands of people around the world, who like to collect comic books. Old comic books, particularly."

Marsha looked at Irving.

Irving nodded. "Yes, I remember now. I saw a couple of those stories. Didn't really read them, but, yes. Some of them are worth quite a lot, aren't they? Superman, or something."

"Yes," said Gresham, his face brightening, giving off the definite impression that he was warming up. "Some of the comics are really quite expensive. Fantastically so when you consider that thirty years ago most of them only cost a dime. Do you know," he said, rounding the last bend before the Willey home, "what Action Comics number one—the first issue with



Superman—the first superhero—goes for?"

"Yeah, it was one hundred dollars. Something like that, I think", said Irving, feeling pleased with his memory.

"Yes, well, you probably saw one of the articles that first came out. It used to go for that. Now it's up around five hundred dollars, when you can find it."

"Amazing." Irving looked at Marsha. "If I'd only saved all my comic books, you'd be married to a very rich man."

"If you'd saved all your comic books." Marsha muttered to him, as Gresham chatted on, oblivious in his enthusiasm, "I wouldn't be married to you."

"Marvel number one," Gresham was saying. "There's another expensive one. The origins of the Human Torch and Submariner. The first Angel. Whiz number one. Number two, actually, because—"

"Here we are," Irving announced, afraid Gresham, immersed in his garishly colored world of *pow* and *shazam*, might overshoot the driveway.

The bulk of the house loomed over them in the dark as they left the car. It was a sort of stripped-down Victorian, large and rambling, but relatively clean-lined. Lights seemed to be on all over, which to them, standing in the slashing rain, gave it the appearance of a very inviting sanctuary. A sanctuary containing a dead, battered body, Irving mused, as they climbed the front steps.

Gresham moved to the left along the porch. "We'd better go in through the side," he explained, "Clifford is lying too close to the front door to get through."

Irving put his arm around Marsha as they followed Gresham. "You all right?" he asked.

"Sure," she said, squeezing his arm a bit. "Just as long as you stick around."

"It's okay. It's just me," Gresham was announcing, as he opened the door.

They entered, and Irving saw the three others, two standing, one seated, all peering very intently at him and Marsha. Then he saw the body. It was Willey all right. And he was dead. Gresham was right. There was no question about it.

Gresham was making the introductions. The first two, Russ Pappas, and Bill Mitchell, seemed all right. Pappas, a New Yorker, was short, bespectacled, heavy, a little sloppy in appearance, no doubt socially maladjusted, but harmless-looking. Mitchell, medium in build, also with glasses, was an easy, friendly Midwesterner.

Fred Snavier, on the other hand, would have been defined by a clinical psychologist, Irving felt sure, as a passive aggressive. Nastiness bristled very near the surface. Bad vibes, as the kids would say.

He had been the only one seated, seemingly the least perturbed by what had happened, a drink in one hand, a faint grin on his face. Irving hadn't disliked many people in his life, none he could immediately recall since his early school days, but for Fred Snavier he decided he might be willing to make an exception.

"The road's blocked by a fallen tree," Irving explained. "Probably what took down the telephone wire, too. We came up here, I don't know why. I guess on the chance that we could help."

"Clifford will appreciate that," Snavier smiled, humorlessly. "I'm sure you'll do him a world of good." He rearranged his compact form in the chair,

savoring his venom. As he began to speak again, a glitter in his eye revealed that Irving's chemical reaction to Snavier was more than returned.

"Just come in here and take over completely, why don't you? You look like such a very capable man." The last words, undoubtedly only meant to drip with sarcasm, escaped with a naked ugliness that apparently unsettled Snavier himself.

It was a bad few moments. Snavier, giving evidence of being rattled by his temporarily loss of control, had glanced down nervously at his drink. The ensuing silence seemed to reverberate heavily in the air, as Irving felt his face coloring, the eyes of the others in the room riveted on him. Something clicked inside Irving. Damn him, he thought, I *will* take over. And do a job of it, too. A glance around the room helped to relax him.

Snavier's embarrassing explosion seemed to have won Irving three new allies. He sensed that for the time being, at least, they'd go along with whatever he suggested, if only to ease the awkwardness of the moment.

"I understand you're all comic book collectors," Irving said, figuring that would open them up, while putting Snavier in his place.

"Yes," Pappas shot out, obviously eager to be of service.

"Clifford has—had—a wonderful collection. For that matter, I guess all of us do," he added, glancing around the room, glasses bouncing nervously on his small, slightly sweaty nose. "But he had one thing none of us has—that's why we came."

"What was that?" Marsha asked.

Gresham spoke up. "Remember when I mentioned Whiz number two?" Marsha and Irving looked blank. "In the car. Just now. Anyway, Whiz number two is a very expensive comic, because it's actually a number one—the first appearance of Captain Marvel; or rather, it almost is."

"I don't follow," said Irving, not following.

"Simple," said Bill Mitchell, solemnly. "There was a number one, only it was never distributed. Just a few issues made up for copyright purposes. It was called Thunder Comics, but contained the first Captain Marvel, as well as a few other characters."

"That's right," said Pappas.

All of them except Snavier seemed to have an irresistible urge to speak, perhaps because it was one of the few times, Irving suspected, that they'd been able to talk about their passion to an interested outside world.

"Everybody who's been collecting a while has heard of it"

Pappas went on. But no one had seen it. There was a rumor of a couple of ex-editors having copies, but no one could authenticate it. In the old days, no one considered comics worth anything, and they were usually just chucked out, or contributed to a scrap paper drive during the Second World War. And then, suddenly—we all wrote to Clifford now and then; most collecting is done through the mail—Clifford told us he had a copy.”

“You can imagine how we felt.” This was Snavier talking, even he apparently not immune to the need of sharing a very arcane knowledge. “We’d all been around a while, seen or perhaps even owned anything of significance, and suddenly here was almost a dream come true. We begged, wheedled, whined—at least they did, I’m sure, from what I’ve seen of them. I have more dignity. And finally Clifford agreed to have us here this weekend, to let us see the so long unseeable.”

“You were talking about the prices of some of the other comics. What would this one be worth?” Irving asked.

“Worth? Are you kidding?” Gresham almost exploded. “It’s priceless. There’s no way you could put a price on it. No way.”

“That right?” Irving asked, looking at the others. They

nodded assent. “Okay,” he said “Now that we know why you’re here, let’s get back to what happened. Do you have any clues?”

Pappas began, his awkwardness in society showing through as he spoke, hands working awkwardly. “We’ve looked around. It appears as if they came in through the living room window, and then went out through the kitchen window in the back.”

Irving, followed by Marsha went back onto the porch looked at the opened window which revealed nothing, then went back inside.

“If it’s okay, we’ll take a look in the kitchen,” he said, moving uncertainly out into the hall.

It was the first time he’d been in the house. Willey had not been a particularly social type. A smile here, a nod there, nothing more. When Willey’s mother, long an invalid, had died a year ago, they’d sent condolences, but they were never acknowledged. In the three years they’d lived here, they’d seen her once, Willey not more than a dozen or two times.

“I’ll show you the way,” said Mitchell, with Pappas tagging along.

“I’m going to take these clothes off,” Gresham said, “and get dry. See you in a couple of minutes.”

"And I," said Snavier, "Am going to sit exactly where I am, and finish my drink. Although I shall certainly miss you all very much."

THE FOUR OF them walked down the hall, which, like the rest of the house, was a bit musty and old-fashioned. They turned a corner, went through a kind of pantry and came out into the kitchen. The back window was wide open, but little rain had come in.

"We haven't touched it at all," breathed Pappas, who gave the impression he might be an asthmatic. "That way, when the police come—"

"Good thinking," said Irving, looking out the window. "I wonder where those tracks out there lead?"

"Gee, I don't know," Mitchell shrugged. "In this rain—"

"Yeah," Irving muttered. As a surety bond underwriter, life didn't offer up much out of the ordinary to him. For which, mostly, he was grateful. But still, here was an opportunity.

"Marsha, you want to go outside with me?" he asked.

"Darling, I've seen too many movies where the hero leaves the heroine alone, in a place that's supposedly safer. And you know what happens then. Any place you're going, you'll find me tagging along. Tightly."



He patted her soft blonde hair and they moved back to the living room, and out the door, Snavier gazing disinterestedly at them as they did so.

Irving paused by the open living room window as they went out on the porch, then down the steps they went, he and Marsha, to the back.

They picked up the trail of footprints, and moved warily into the dark beyond, no light yet breaking through the sky as the rain continued to fall, unabated. A great place to get jumped. They slopped through the mud to one side of the tracks, careful not to obscure them.

"The guy had pretty big feet," Irving observed.

"Isn't it incredible?" Marsha

asked, "Grown men collecting children's comic books?"

"I don't know," he answered. "People collect anything and everything. I'd be willing to bet, anything that's ever been made, someone collects. Matchbooks, coins. I once saw a picture in a Sunday supplement of a guy in England who collected railroad crossing signals. He had this tiny yard of his crammed with them. There are even people who collect barbed wire."

"Barbed wire!" Marsha laughed. "Why would anyone want to collect that?"

"I don't know," said Irving. "Maybe to keep the comic book collectors out."

The footprints had brought them in a half-circle to the road, where they disappeared. Irving led them across the road, then up and down it, looking on both sides, but no more tracks emerged.

They sloshed back. When they reached the rear of the house, Irving stopped. Marsha huddled closer to him, trying to keep out of the water that was pouring off the eaves.

"Look at that," he said, pointing in the general direction of the window.

"What?" Marsha asked.

"Somebody got dumb. Look, don't you see? Below the window, on the wall—the streaks of mud."

"So?"

"Doesn't that seem odd to you?"

"Why? They're from the person who did what he did to Willey."

"Yeah, I'm sure you're right about that. But doesn't it seem strange that his feet were muddy coming out of the window?"

"Why, of course. But wait a minute!" Marsha looked triumphant. "He'd come in from the rain. He must have had mud on his shoes when he came in. That's all that is."

"Stop looking triumphant," Irving told her. "Don't you remember the kitchen? The floor was spotless. Cleaner than our kitchen floor," he added gratuitously. "And outside the living room window. Remember we stopped for a second on the porch? I'd seen our tracks from where we and Gresham had walked. And it seemed funny there were no tracks leading to the living room window. What I'd figured was that the guy had come in just before it began to rain. But now, I don't think so."

"Well, how else do you explain it? That he lowered his shoes out the window, dipped them in mud, and then climbed out?"

"No time for whimsy, Marsha. We're dealing with a killer, and one probably not many feet from where we are. What I think,

and I'd be willing to bet on it, is that someone came out this window with clean-shod feet, walked to the road through the mud, and then walked backward through the same footprints, twisting his body around, grabbed for the window sill, and scrambled up into the house, leaving the mud from his shoes on the way."

"Now that you've solved the murder," Marsha said, "let's go home. I'm scared."

"Maybe you're right. Maybe I'd better take you home first. None of those lulus look particularly dangerous, but still—"

"No. I'm staying with you. I may be scared, but I'm also intrigued."

Irving shrugged, and they went back in the house, all four of the guests following them as they headed straight toward the kitchen.

"Why are we going back here?" Marsha asked.

"To find out what happened to the mud," Irving answered.

"What mud?" came out of Gresham and Mitchell simultaneously.

They were in the kitchen now. Irving began poking around.

"What mud?" Gresham repeated.

Irving put his hand on the dishtowel hanging over the

stainless steel sink. It was wet. Very wet.

"It was probably this washcloth," he told them. "Whoever came back through that window probably cleaned off his shoes with this washcloth, then rinsed off all the mud."

"Came back through the window? What do you mean?" asked Mitchell, looking stunned. Come to think of it, Irving noticed, they all looked stunned.

He explained his theory and found himself staring at four very uneasy guys. A fifth uneasy guy was added to the room as the thought flashed through his mind that perhaps they were all in on it.

Snavier recovered first. "Why the devil should any of us have done it?" he asked, his face having settled into its habitual mask of disdain. "What would we be after?" Before he'd even completed the sentence, the composure strikingly disappeared.

Gresham had anticipated him. He was already halfway up the stairs as the others poured out into the hall.

THEY FOLLOWED Gresham up, into a small room right off the second floor landing. It was a room that hit you with a jolt of color. Framed comics, scores of them, lined the walls on three sides, occasionally interrupted by

a framed full page of an antique 'Tarzan' or 'Flash Gordon' newspaper strip. The fourth wall consisted entirely of metal shelves, supporting hundreds, perhaps thousands, of comics.

Gresham was riffling through a red velvet-lined cedar box, about two feet high, ten inches wide, and a foot deep.

"Clifford kept his rarest comics in here," he panted. "The Thunder One was right on the top." He put the box down. "It's not in here," he said.

"Let me look." Snavier ripped the box out of his hands, set it on a desk in the corner of the room, and went through the contents meticulously.

"He's right," he finally conceded. "It's gone. Thunder number one is gone." He and his fellow collectors eyed one another nervously.

Finally, Snavier turned to Irving. "What next, Mr. Detective?"

It was meant sarcastically, but Irving dismissed the sarcasm, basking in the sound of the words themselves. At the moment, he felt very much like a detective. Even better, he was already prepared to tell them what was next.

"Well," he said, looking at Marsha, liking the feeling of how very impressed with him she must be. Apparently he could rise to the unusual after all. "I

suggest we look at the bottoms of a few shoes. Gresham's, of course, are muddy because he's been outside since the murder. But I take it none of you have been."

Pappas stammered, "But what—"

"Just show me your rooms and let me look at your shoes," said Irving, deciding it wouldn't hurt to be a little enigmatic. "After I've looked, I'll tell you what I'm looking for."

They went into Pappas', Snavier's and Mitchell's rooms, Irving picking up each pair of shoes and carrying them all back to the display room. There, he turned them all upside down on the desk.

"See, Marsha?" he pointed out. "Two of these pairs have the normal, gritty look any shoe gets after a while. But the bottoms of these—" he held out the largest pair of the three—are as clean as a kitchen floor. Most kitchen floors."

"How interesting," Marsha said, giving him a hard pinch in his spare tire. "You mean those are the shoes the murderer cleaned off."

"But that's impossible!" Snavier yelled. "Those are my shoes!"

"You'd better sit down," Irving said, hoping that if Snavier tried anything, the other three would help subdue him. Snavier



But Marsha did. "Irving," she said, what do you have on the tip of your shoe? The left one," she added as he stared dumbly downward.

He lifted his left shoe. There was a bit of red fluff on it. He plucked it off. "You mean this?"

"Yes," she said, her green eyes shining. "Where have you seen that before?" He tried to look intelligent, but it was tough work, because at the moment there was nothing to support the expression.

"I don't know what you mean," he said at last.

"Downstairs," Marsha said, "on Mr. Willey's pajama pants. Along the leg. There was red fuzz on them, too. Just like yours."

"So?"

"So the Thunder comic book was stolen, or at least something in this room was. Mr. Willey wasn't killed downstairs. He was killed up here. The fuzz on his pants—on your shoe—came from the rug on the hallway stairs."

"I get it! Someone killed him up here, you mean, and then dragged the body down the stairs, to make it look as if an outsider—to keep attention from being drawn to the fact that someone had tried to steal the Thunder number one."

"What do we do now, Irving?" she asked, her face upturned, very soft, very lovely, very much a partner in his

looked exactly nasty enough to know karate.

"You can't accuse me of anything!" Snavier shouted. "When the cops get here, they'll prove I couldn't have—For one thing, there's no assurance anyway that the Thunder is gone. It may be anywhere in this room, or perhaps Willey hid it somewhere else, fearing—"

"Okay. So why don't you settle down?" Irving asked, soothingly. "If you're innocent, you've got nothing to worry about. Just quiet down so we can proceed with what we're doing." Proceed with the investigation would have sounded a bit better.

"Do whatever you like!" Snavier had a bit of hysteria in his voice now. "I won't stop your amateurish rantings."

A little stung, Irving turned toward Marsha. This time he didn't have a comforting next step to fall back upon.

suddenly-opened detective agency. It had been fun Hawkshawing it all by himself, but he realized he was enjoying this even more.

"Gee, I don't know," Irving mused. "Do you suppose we should look for the comic? If the thief's stuck it in his suitcase, we've got it made."

They searched everywhere, traveling together where ever they went, so that all could keep an eye on one another.

They went through the house from attic to cellar, meticulously. Then, reluctantly, they fought their way through the rain to the cars, shivering in the wet as one or two of them searched the insides. Thunder number one did not appear.

FINALLY, they returned, very wet, very woebegone, to the living room, all of them virtually too miserable to care that there was a murderer in their midst. Mitchell and Gresham joined Snavier around the Scotch bottle.

"I think you did it, Irving," Snavier grunted. "And now you're trying to kill the rest of us off by giving us pneumonia. What now, anyway?"

"I don't know," Irving said, discouraged. "I guess now we wait for the cops."

"Well, let's hope their ideas are a little more intelligent than

yours," Snavier barked, wringing a shirtcuff out into a flowerpot.

"Irving," Marsha said. She'd been quietly tugging at him for some time.

"Now now, Marsha," Irving said, pulling away from her. Snavier's remark had got his goat. If only to show that slimy boor up, he'd get an answer to this thing if it killed him.

He reviewed what he knew, plus what he surmised. If he could go over it, step by step, perhaps something would show itself. His mind had a tendency to wander, but with the image of Snavier dogging it, this time it hewed strictly to business.

It seemed pretty obvious the killer had been trying to steal Thunder number one when somehow Mr. Willey heard him, tried to stop him, and got hit by the flashlight, something of a freak shot that killed him instantly. Judging by what he'd seen of the four here, even Snavier, the murder wasn't planned, just something that occurred in a split-second of fear.

You'd think, Irving mused, something as foreign to his nature as this violent accident would have sent our man into a paralysis of fear. Instead, coolly, carefully, he went about the business of covering up his tracks.

The rug up in the display room. There were probably tiny

traces of glass still embedded, but that's all. Our man must have picked over the whole thing, plucking up everything he found, and then dumped it downstairs, near the body, which he'd probably carried down first of all.

Irving lost his concentration for a moment and looked up. Snavier was pouring himself another Scotch. He had an easy way with a dead man's liquor. Then Irving realized what had disturbed him. It was Marsha again.

"Please, darling," he urged softly, "I'm trying to figure this out. It's important to me, if only to show up that cretin over there." He glanced in Snavier's direction. Marsha understood, and let her hand drop from his arm.

He returned to his thoughts. Once the body, the flashlight and the broken glass were down, the murderer must have unlocked the living room window, then perhaps even squeezed out the front door, pushed up the window from the outside, and re-entered the house. Next, having secured Snavier's shoes along the way—why Snavier's shoes? Was it Snavier? Or were they simply the handiest! Perhaps Snavier slept the soundest, or perhaps, even, if anyone in the house were to be suspected, the murderer would rather it be

Snavier. That last certainly seemed plenty logical.

And then, out the back window he went, stepping carefully through the mud, then even more carefully backtracking. Once inside, he meticulously cleaned off his shoes and headed back upstairs, first to replace them, and then to wait in his bed.

And that was it. What had it shown him? Nothing yet, Irving sighed, but went right back to it. If he went over it again, and again, perhaps something would manifest itself.

Snavier was drinking, Pappas trying the phone again, Mitchell and Gresham sitting very quietly on the couch when Irving jumped up. It was the third time he'd gone through the whole business, but this time he'd stopped at that dishcloth over the kitchen sink. Something, some little detail, had suddenly intruded itself on his mind.

He ran into the kitchen and back out before the startled people in the room could do much more than let their jaws drop in surprise.

From the hall Irving yelled to Marsha. He was feeling excited at the moment. Perhaps the way Sherlock Holmes did, or Charlie Chan, or Sam Spade, or—"There are a lot of bathrooms in this house, aren't there?" he yelled rhetorically, to Marsha.

"Yes. You saw them. Each of the bedrooms—"

"I know. Stay there a second. I want to see something."

"Hey!" she cried, but he was already off. He swept through the five bathrooms, barely pausing in each, then galloped, face flushed with triumph, down the stairs.

"I know who did it," he said.

Four expectant faces eyed him.

"Neatness counts," Irving said. "Sometimes it really counts."

"Stop with the theatrics!" Snavier exploded. "We're in no mood for statements. Who's guilty?"

It was always a pleasure to ignore Snavier, so Irving did it now. In a life that was good, and pleasurable, but generally unremarkable, this was a moment to savour. Quietly, and carefully, he detailed his theory about the killer's movements, once, and then began again, but this time stopped at the dish towel.

"That was the fatal mistake," he said.

He paused for breath, and found, looking at the four suspects, that if he didn't already know who was guilty, he'd immediately lock up three of them, only Snavier at this point showing the slightest bit of composure. Gresham was worrying his long hair with his left

hand, while the right beat a steady tattoo on the arm of the couch. Pappas' mouth was hanging open, his hands waging a desperate battle with one another, his legs continually shifting, as if there were no way in the world they could possibly be comfortable. Mitchell—well, Mitchell just looked weird.

But Irving didn't blame at least two of them. In one of those weird reactions of the very innocent, they were probably beginning to feel slightly guilty themselves. He glanced at Marsha. Damned if she didn't look a little guilty too.

"Okay, you've had your relished dramatic pause," said Snavier. "But now you'd better get on with it. Take any longer, and we'll have lost too much interest to care."

"If only it had been you, Snavier," Irving sighed. Then he turned to the others. "As I said, neatness counts. This time, I'm afraid it counted just a little too much. You see, the dish cloth our man used to clean Snavier's shoes with—Once the shoes were clean, he very carefully washed the cloth out, and then hung it up, folding it very carefully and neatly as he did so. It took me a while, but finally I remembered that dish cloth. I had a feeling that it had been rather distinctly folded.

"So I ran back and checked it,

and it was. Folded once upon itself, and then, from each side, folded back toward the middle, the four edges meeting in back. Slightly unusual, I thought, and so I checked, checked the towels in each of the bathrooms in this house, Willey's included. As a result of my little survey, I would guess that it's a fold employed by only twenty percent of the male American populace. Of the five people in this house only one man folded his bathtowel in the same manner as the kitchen dishcloth. And that man is—"

"Mitchell!" Marsha's voice rang out.

BILL MITCHELL started to rise, stopped short, then crumpled in his chair, tears springing forth. "I knew I'd never get away with it! I knew! I never meant to do it! I swear I didn't."

"We're sure you didn't." It was Snavier's voice, and surprisingly gentle. "Why don't you tell us what actually happened, Bill?"

Mitchell looked up, pale, dark shadows suddenly drawn around his eyes. He wiped them, then his glasses, as he spoke.

"It was just about as he said," he pointed weakly at Irving. "I'd brought this with me." He took a great wad of bills out of his pocket. "Two thousand dollars. I was prepared to offer him that

much. I had to have Thunder number one. I had to. You must know the feeling." His fellow collectors nodded slightly, sympathetically.

"I felt it was the only chance I'd ever have. When Willey turned me down, laughed at me, I decided to steal it. Like most of us, Willey liked to draw. I'd seen he had a pair of white cotton gloves he'd wear when he drew or inked, to keep his hand from sweating on the page. I took them, and last night, put them on, went into the room where the books were kept, removed Thunder One, and then, as I turned to go out, I felt someone grabbing at me, cursing.

"I felt an awful terror—it was almost as if I were being attacked by some unknown, terrible thing—and struck out with the flashlight. Somehow, I knew immediately he would be dead. When I turned on the light, I saw it was Clifford. And in a few moments, I was sure he was dead. I've always been a very methodical person. You've discovered that, Mr. Mandelowitz," he said, looking at Irving, "and so, though in a sense I *did* panic. I very methodically did all I could to eliminate any suspicion of my guilt.

"I went back to my room, removed everything but my socks and gloves, and then went to Clifford's room and put on his

robe. I'd heard of the material from people's clothing being found near a murder scene, things like that, convicting them. So that's what I decided to do. Everything else is pretty much the way Irving explained it. I was meticulous. You're right. There may be a microscopic sliver or two of glass in the display room's rug, but I'm sure there's no more.

"Altogether, from the time I discovered what I'd done, to the time I went back to bed, to await the morning, I spent over two and a half hours trying to cover myself and make it look as if someone from the outside had done it. I even arranged his body downstairs exactly as it had been when he fell, scattered the glass fragments in the same pattern, cut up my gloves when I was through, and ground them in the kitchen disposal. But it—" He began to weep again—"it was all for nothing."

"Mitchell!" It was Snavier's voice again, and this time it was anything but soft. "The Thunder Number one. Before they cart you off, what the hell did you do with it?"

"Forgive me," Mitchell pleaded, even paler now. "When Clifford grabbed at me, he also grabbed the book. It ripped, almost in half. I knew if it were found that way, I couldn't replace it in that condition. So

I—I ground it up in the disposal."

The effect of these last words was astonishing. Snavier's eyebrows leapt, as he screamed, "Murderer!"

Pappas shot to his feet and swore in a stream that seemed unending. Gresham, moving so quickly he was almost a blur, was already in the kitchen, dismantling the disposal unit.

"Careful," Irving shouted to him. "You can electrocute yourself on those things."

"Who cares?" Gresham shouted back. Another moment, and he was with them again. "Nothing" he sighed, "Nothing. It's all gone. Every last shred."

"My God," said Irving. "You all seem almost more broken up by that than by Clifford's death."

Snavier looked at him. "There are other fellow collectors," he explained, passion spent, "But there may have been only one Thunder number one."

AS IRVING and Marsha walked back toward their house, after watching the local squad car drive away, Irving said, "You know, at the beginning there I was envisioning myself in a detective agency, and after that bit about the red fluff, I decided I'd better take you in as a partner. Irving gave Marsha a mock-petulant look, "Now, I'm beginning to think your name

should be above mine on the door."

"Why?" Marsha asked. "You were the one who guessed Mitchell by the towel folding. I thought that was terrific. Really observant."

"But so were you," Irving said, as he caught sight of their house, nestled a few hundred yards below them. "I heard you call out Mitchell's name."

"Oh, that," said Marsha offhandedly. Irving decided it was a very studied offhandedness. "That had nothing to do with the towels."

Irving stopped in mid-stride. "Then how did you—?"

Marsha's eyes began to shine gleefully, betraying the mask of modesty she was trying to assume. "Well, it seemed to me that anyone who'd gone out making those tracks in that terrible rain would have to get awfully wet. I began to wonder why no one but Gresham had wet clothes. So while we were searching for the missing comic, I was also looking for—what I finally found."

She had paused. Even taking over my dramatic pause, Irving sighed, but letting her enjoy it.

"And what was that?" he asked, at the proper moment.

"Well, Clifford's bathrobe, just as Mitchell said. It was soaked. Very clever, his wearing that, because a wet bathrobe

might strike the casual searcher as something Clifford had slipped on just after his bath."

"So? Come on, you're making me as impatient as Snavier."

"Oh, don't you wish he'd been the guilty one?" Marsha said, "Anyway, Mr. Mitchell had made another mistake. Come to think of it, his neatness had betrayed him again."

"What had he done? Tied the robe-belt the same way he'd tied Snavier's shoes?"

"Now don't get snappish. The robe had a very distinct aroma. The aroma of a rather commonly used antiperspirant. Only I checked Mr. Willey's bathroom shelf. It wasn't his brand."

"So?"

"So I figured it belonged to the person of whomever had been struggling about in it, trying to hide his crime. So while we were out searching the cars, I—"

"Yeah?"

"Sniffed around." When Irving said nothing, Marsha began to walk again, explaining, "No one but Mitchell used the same brand, if any at all," she said, her nose wrinkling.

She'd started toward the house, and he followed.

"Marsha," Irving said "You've ruined my morning. There I was busily cerebrating and you'd already—I thought I was such a hotshot. I've got the feeling now, on our detective

agency door, I should ask you if I can keep my name on with yours."

"Don't feel bad," she said. "All it means is that I'm a hotshot, too. Besides," she added, "How could a morning be ruined when it's a morning shortly to be filled with the aroma of blueberry pancakes?"

"Really?"

"With fresh blueberries."

"You're right," he smiled, happily. He'd never noticed how hungry he was. "This morning can be saved. And so can our marriage, too."

She looked at him, an uncertain smile on her face.

"But only if you give up your career." His face wore an unaccustomed severity.

"No more detecting? Oh well, if that's the only way out."

"No. I don't mean that. I need you for that. What I mean is, no more sniffing about strange men in the middle of a Sunday morning. Or even on a week-day."

They climbed the stairs to their blueberry pancakes as Marsha nodded at Irving, gravely, very gravely.

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A COUNTRY LIKE THE SUN

*Deep in that beautiful land, a thing of evil
waited, watched—until the day came to strike.
Before that day came a man was slated to die.*

A Novelet of Strange Terror

by EDWARD D. HOCH

DAVE WINTER hadn't asked for the job. The landlocked stretches of Quatronova would never lend themselves to the sort of life he most enjoyed, and the carefree summers of sailing on the sound were now a thing of the past. He'd taken the job as an engineer with the Quatronova Oil Company in the expectation of a desk in Miami and only occasional flying journeys to the jungle oil fields he'd heard so much about.

Now, a year later, he was firmly implanted in Quatronova City, a small cog in a vast development project about which he knew very little.

He'd spent his first two weeks in the city, inspecting the oil fields by day and staying in his

shabby hotel room at night. He'd stretch out on the bed and stare up at the stained ceiling because there was nothing better to do in all that heat.

Then, on his seventeenth day in the country, he met Connie McDaniels. That first time he saw her, on the main street of the sleepy city, she was wearing pink shorts and riding a white Honda. She was obviously American, and that much was good enough for him. A few hours later, when he spied the Honda parked before the bank, he went inside.

"Pardon me, Miss," he said, tipping the faded straw hat he wore against the sun. "You're an American, aren't you?"

She looked up at him, uncertain but friendly. "Just



barely. I'm from Key West. You must be the new engineer, Dave Winter. I've heard about you."

"Nothing bad, I hope."

"All good."

"I was beginning to think I was the only American in town," he said.

"Oh, there are lots of us."

"Your folks live here?" He'd already noticed there was no wedding ring, and she seemed no older than twenty.

"No. I've been down here with the Peace Corps. That's over, now, but I decided to stay

around. I'll probably head back in the fall."

Winter offered her a cigarette and she took it. "You enjoy this heat?"

"In July it's just as hot in Key West, though we do have a breeze. Central America isn't bad if you're used to it."

"I guess I'll never be used to it. I still don't know what I'm doing here."

"No?" She smiled as if she knew some dark secret. "Buy me a drink tonight and I'll tell you."

"How do you know so much?"

"You've been the topic of local conversation, whether or not you know it. I should talk to you before Mrs. Simmons invites you to one of her parties."

"That drink sounds better all the time. Where can I meet you?"

"I'll pick you up at your hotel."

"On the motorbike?"

She laughed, throwing back her head and then biting her lower lip in a manner he found quite charming.

"That would be fun. But I guess I'd better bring the car. Seven all right?"

"Fine. It'll be my first night out on the town."

He went back to his room and shaved, and never once did he bother to look up at the stains on the ceiling.

CONNIE MCDANIELS was ten minutes late, but it was worth the wait. Dressed in a summery sheath he might have expected to see on Park Avenue, and with her long brown hair pulled back attractively, she looked five years older and a hundred times more charming.

"Any preference as to bars?" she asked, leading him to the car. It was an old Ford convertible with the top down.

"None. I've done most of my drinking in the room, or out at that little bar near the oil fields."

"No wonder you think this town is dead!" She drove across town to the Quatronova Imperial, a massive new hotel of glass and steel that he'd glimpsed from the airport.

The cocktail lounge just off the main lobby was patterned after the plush and dusky lounges of New York or Chicago, but somehow it still wasn't quite the same.

"There! How's this?" she asked as they settled down to a couple of tall tropic drinks.

"It's the best I've seen in seventeen days. I'll tell you. But I think it's time you dropped all this mystery. Who are you, and how do you know so much about me? And who's the party-giving Mrs. Simmons, anyway?"

She smiled and bit her lower lip and he loved her for it. "So

many questions! What would you have done if you hadn't found me?"

"Gone out of my mind in about another day, I think. Come on, talk."

"Well, my name is Connie McDaniels. I'm ex-Key West, ex-Peace Corps, and twenty-four years old. You're Dave Winter, thirty-two, a petroleum engineer from New York and Miami. Right?"

"New York and Miami and a lot of places in between. Anything else?"

"You're unmarried, which is pretty rare in a rather good-looking fellow like you."

He took another sip of his drink. "All right. Who told you about me?"

Her eyes twinkled for a moment before she answered. "Remember Izzo Naught? Colonel Naught?"

Dave Winter's hand jerked and the tall drink splattered over the tablecloth. "Damn! I'm sorry."

"I didn't realize the reaction would be so violent."

A waiter appeared from somewhere and helped repair the damage. When he was settled again, Winter said, "I remember Izzo Naught. Five years ago I was one of twelve men on a jury during his trial for first degree murder."

"I knew that."

"Izzo Naught is here—in

Quatronova?" He remembered now, the vague newspaper stories of a flight to Latin America. But the actual country had never been mentioned.

She smiled over the rim of her glass. "He's not only here, but you're working for him."

"What!"

She nodded. "Quatronova Oil is a division of the Quatronova Development Corporation, and Izzo Naught is Quatronova Development."

"I'm be damned!" Winter said. "But why?"

"Why what?"

"Why was I brought here?"

"The way I understand it, Izzo Naught personally requested it. He gets a list of new employees, and when he saw you were working for the Miami office he remembered the name and had you transferred down here. Maybe it's just his way of thanking you. The jury did acquit him of that murder."

"But we didn't—that's the point! It was a hung jury, eleven to one for acquittal. The judge dismissed us after four days, and Naught fled the country before he could be tried a second time. Since the evidence was flimsy, they never tried to extradite him."

"I didn't hear that part."

"You probably didn't hear this either—I was the only one on that jury who held out for

conviction, and Izzo Naught knows it."

"I'm sure you're not in any danger because of that," she said, aware of his concern. "He wouldn't try to harm you."

"Connie, I'm still convinced he killed a man five years ago. And I'm convinced he'd kill again."

"That's foolish. He's a wonderful man."

"Then why did he bring me here, away from any questioning American police, to a country he practically controls?"

I'm sure I don't know. But you're judging him wrongly."

"You haven't told me yet what you're doing mixed up in all this."

"A friend of mine, a fellow I date, works for Colonel Naught. I guess that's why I'm still in Quatronova."

"What's this colonel business?"

She lit another cigarette before answering. "It seems he was a colonel in the Army Reserve. The people down here are quite impressed with military titles."

"And Mrs. Simmons?"

"She's an American divorcee who's taken up with Naught. She gives his parties, entertains his friends. Sort of an official hostess."

Dave Winter dredged back into his memory. "Naught was

married back in the States. Is his wife with him?"

"No. He's never mentioned her." She drained her glass. "You'll be meeting them all at a party before long. Mrs. Simmons is having one tomorrow evening. I thought you might be invited."

"I haven't been, and I won't be here to accept. I'm quitting the job and going back home."

"Afraid?" she mocked him.

"I didn't know I was working for Izzo Naught, even indirectly."

"He's done a great deal for this country in the past few years."

"The Izzo Naught I knew was a criminal and a murderer. I don't think he's changed much. Did he ever tell you about his life in the states, about the murder?"

"Not really."

"Ask me sometime. I'll tell you what he was back there."

"I don't think I want to know."

They ordered another drink and Winter changed the subject, but the tension remained between them. He was back at his hotel by ten, the evening only a disturbing memory, once more aware of the heat and the bugs and the stains on the ceiling of his room.

THE NEXT DAY was hot, with a sort of mist off the mountains that reminded him of

New York. But here the nearest water was a hundred miles over the hills, and the moisture in the air only served to intensify the heat.

Connie McDaniels phoned him at work just after noon. "Hi! Quit your job yet?" She was friendly and a bit too flip, as if the previous evening's uncertainties had evaporated with the rising of the sun.

"Not quite yet."

"You're invited to Mrs. Simmons' party tonight. She asked me to phone you."

He'd been intending to say no if the invitation arrived before he left for the States, but now here it was and he saw no great harm in accepting it. Izzo Naught—Colonel Naught—could do very little at a party with dozens of people around. And it just might be interesting to hear what he had to say, to learn why Dave Winter had been brought to Quatronova.

"All right," he agreed after a moment's consideration. "Where is her place?"

"Would you like me to pick you up?"

"What about your boy friend?"

"He'll be coming with Colonel Naught."

"Oh? Sure, you can pick me up if you'd like."

But there was one thing he wanted to tell her, whether or



not she wanted to hear it. On the drive up into the hills that evening, with the breeze blowing through her long brown hair like a lover's breath, he faced her and said, "Connie, about that murder and the trial, I think you should hear about it from me. Right now."

She pushed in the cigarette lighter and guided the car effortlessly around a farmer's cart in the road. "All right. Tell me."

"Izzo Naught was a sort of gangster back in the states. A businessman, sure, but his Southern Fruit Company was really a front for an empire of gambling and narcotics traffic. Finally the city administration changed and they decided Izzo Naught had to go. The police began putting on the pressure. They couldn't catch him in a criminal act, but they sure could make it unpleasant for him.

"They followed him every-

where, followed his wife and children too. Izzo finally had to send the children away to school, vowing vengeance against the entire police department. When his wife was arrested for a minor driving violation, he shouted in the presence of a dozen witnesses that he'd kill the police chief, a man named Dwyer."

"And he did?" She blew smoke against the windshield, concentrating on the dark, curving road ahead.

"He did. He phoned Chief Dwyer one afternoon and arranged a meeting for that night, on the grounds of his estate. He told Dwyer he wanted to talk about leaving town. Of course Dwyer went. He left a detective in the car a block away and walked to the driveway of the Naught house, at a point about eighty yards from the house. He was supposed to meet Naught there, in the shadow of a pine tree. Anyway, when he didn't return in an hour, the detective went looking for him and found his body. He'd been killed by a blow from a rock. The public outcry was such that Izzo Naught was indicted and tried for the crime."

"But not convicted."

"But not convicted," he admitted sadly. "Izzo had been in the house, playing bridge with his wife and another couple. They all testified he was never

out of their sight, though he did step out on the terrace for a moment while he was dummy one hand.

"That of course is the key to it. He could see the tree where Captain Dwyer waited from the terrace, and he could easily have signalled someone to kill him. The trouble is, the police could find no trace of the actual murderer, and the waiting detective saw no one approach from his direction. The other eleven jurors felt that his alibi was unshakable and voted for acquittal. I was the only one who held out for conviction."

"What happened then?"

"There was talk of a new trial, but the district attorney knew he didn't have much chance. When Naught fled to Central America, they dropped the case. They were pleased to be rid of him."

"But you're still convinced he had the man killed?"

"Why else did he lure him out there? And why didn't he walk out to meet him? He claimed he forgot about the meeting, but the truth was that he knew Dwyer was dead."

"Here we are," Connie said, turning suddenly into a driveway between two white stone pillars. A gateman stepped for somewhere, recognized her, and stepped quickly aside with a wave of his hand.

"What would he have done if

he didn't know you?" Dave Winter asked her.

"Shot me, I suppose." She glanced at him and grinned. "Isn't that what you wanted me to say?"

"You take this whole thing pretty lightly."

"Wait till you meet them. They're not the monsters you imagine."

The home of Mrs. Dimmons was an air-conditioned place that looked like a movie set from the thirties. There were perhaps fifty people at the party, and they might have been imported for the occasion direct from New York and Paris. For Dave Winter the whole thing was taking on the aspects of some fantastic dream.

Mrs. Simmons herself was a slender woman of great grace, who looked under forty and wore a golden dress that clung to her curving body. She welcomed Connie McDaniels with a sisterly kiss and Dave Winter with a firm handshake. "Yes, yes. Dave Winter. I remember Izzo speaking of you."

"Is he here yet?" Winter asked, feeling the beginnings of something tense and chilling in the pit of his stomach.

"Not yet. He had some business matters to attend to." She motioned around the room. "Have you met the others?"

"Only Connie McDaniels."

"A fine girl. She'll show you around. She's engaged to Izzo's bodyguard."

"Oh?"

Mrs. Simmons disappeared into a cluster of people and Dave Winter picked up a drink and backed against one wall to study the gathering. The girls all wore formal gowns, and the men were all in white suits. They might have been angels, or western heroes from some movie of his youth. He remembered his father taking him to the ball park, where you could always tell the white-suited home team from the villainous opposition in their gray traveling costumes.

He remembered his disillusion and confusion when his father once took him to see the home team in a neighboring city, and his heroes took the field in the dreaded gray uniforms. He wondered if these men, like heroes everywhere, were only white-suited at home.

"Enjoying yourself?" Connie McDaniels asked, sliding against the wall next to him.

"Sure. What's the occasion for all this, anyway?"

"She has them every month. They're a bit boring after a while."

"You didn't tell me you were engaged to this guy; or that he was Naught's bodyguard."

"Neither one is exactly true."

A murmur swept through the

crowd as the doors at one end of the room were opened. Without seeing him, Winter knew that Izzo Naught had entered.

"The great man?"

Connie nodded. "Come meet him."

"I've had the pleasure."

"Then come meet my friend, Johnny."

Johnny Quinn was young and tall and muscular. He looked like a bodyguard, even in his white suit, though at the moment he seemed more interested in Connie than in Izzo Naught.

"How are you, Con?" he asked, kissing her lightly on one cheek.

Dave Winter decided he didn't like the man. They shook hands and exchanged a few words, and then Winter found himself being steered in the general direction of the main attraction.

Izzo Naught hadn't changed much in five years. He was still a big middle-aged man with powerful hands and a dark complexion that hinted at his Italian-Spanish parentage. He said something in Spanish to Johnny Quinn and then turned his full attention on Dave Winter.

"Ah, yes," he said in the familiar booming voice. "I remember you. Back row of the jury box, always watching me during the trial. I remember you!" He laughed and held out his hand.

Winter took it, gave a half-hearted shake, and dropped it like something dead. "I remember you too, Izzo."

"Here I'm Colonel Naught. Remember it, or I can have you fired." He gave a booming laugh and turned to the others. Mrs. Simmons had appeared from somewhere and was at his side. "Look, everybody, this is the reason I'm here. This engineer who was on my jury!"

Dave Winter felt himself flush. "What do you want with me, Colonel?" he asked quietly.

"Want? I want to show you my kingdom, to show you what you have wrought." He slipped an arm easily around Mrs. Simmons' waist. "It was you that brought me here, Winter. Not the whole of the United States government. Only you. If the jury had acquitted me, I could have lived in the United States a free man, unafraid of ever being tried a second time. But because you held out for conviction and hung the jury, I decided to leave the country rather than live with that thing hanging over my head."

"I really hated you those first few months, Winter, even though I knew they could never convict me in twenty trials. But I don't hate you any more. When I discovered you were working for Quatronova Oil, I thought it would be a great joke to transfer you down here."

"Yeah, a great joke."

Izzo Naught smiled broadly. "Let us talk a little in private. Come, I'll show you my gun collection."

It quickly became obvious that Johnny Quinn would accompany them, walking a bit behind. Winter's eyes searched the firmness of his white jacket for the bulge of a shoulder holster, but detected nothing. Perhaps he only carried a knife at formal parties.

The three of them passed through massive double doors and down a long hallway. "I thought this house belonged to Mrs. Simmons," Dave Winter commented.

Naught looked pained: "It does. I keep my collection here so I can show it off at parties. Actually, I live in a small apartment at my office, Quatro-nova Development."

"And what are you developing?"

"All in good time, my friend. All in good time. Here." He snapped on a light, revealing three walls lined with dozens of weapons. "I moved the entire collection here from the States when I fled."

Dave Winter remembered its being mentioned at the trial. He moved among the guns, aware that Quinn had remained standing in the doorway. "Very impressive."



Naught gestured toward a pistol. "The Colt Navy revolver, carried by Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders. And here's a Webley like the one Custer was using that day. An American Blunderbuss—"

"Isn't the crossbow a bit out of place?" Dave Winter asked.

"Not at all. It was a forerunner of modern firearms. Did you know Pope Innocent II actually outlawed crossbows in 1139? They were greatly feared in battle. And over here is a Black Watch pistol, an 18th Century Scottish flintlock."

"You said we'd talk in private," Winter interrupted.

Izzo Naught turned to face him, his white suit beginning to show circles of sweat under the arms. There seemed to be no air

conditioning in this part of the big house.

"So I did, and we will." He waved a hand at the fourth wall of the room, and Johnny Quinn stepped in as if on cue, pulling down a large wall map of the Caribbean and all of Central America.

"Did you ever realize the unique geography of this area, Winter? Here, in landlocked Quatronova, a country so poor it needs Peace Corps assistance and every sort of economic aid program, is the key to the entire sub-continent. These are airline distances to Cuba, and the Dominican Republic, and the Canal Zone. And other places too."

"How does that concern you?"

The big man smiled. "It concerns Quatronova Development. I am in the process of buying up a great deal of jungle land."

"For oil?"

He shrugged. "For oil and other things. Today, Quatronova is all but unknown. Tomorrow, it will be a country like the sun, bursting forth on the conscience of the world." As if to emphasize his point, he jabbed his finger at the map.

"Are you working with the Quatronova government?" Dave Winter asked.

"The government is old and

corrupt. I could topple it tomorrow."

Suddenly Winter wanted to be out of there, away from this man and his mad dreams.

"I have to be getting back," he said. "I'm flying to Florida in the morning."

"Oh?"

"I'm quitting Quatronova Oil."

"A better offer?"

"You might say I don't like working for murderers."

"You still believe I killed Dwyer?"

"I believe you stepped out on that porch and signaled your man to kill him. It's the same thing."

"Don't you think it strange that the actual killer was never found, then, even with the sizable rewards that the city posted? Don't you think it odd that a hired killer would use a rock for a murder weapon, when a gun or knife would be far more certain?"

Dave Winter stared hard at him, trying to detect the truth. "Who do you think killed him?"

The big man shrugged. "Some passing toughs. The streets of America aren't safe these days."

"You think they could have killed him without a struggle? Without being seen by the detective in the car?"

"He died, didn't he?"

"He died, and I still think you

killed him. That's why I'm returning to Miami in the morning."

"Very well. I'm sorry you won't stay. I had great plans for you."

"I'll bet." Dave Winter turned and started out of the room, aware that Johnny Quinn still guarded the door. "Was this fellow with you back in the States?" he tossed over his shoulder.

"No, Johnny is a recent member of my circle. Johnny, please escort Mr. Winter out, will you?"

They left Naught with his gun collection and headed back down the long hall.

"How'd you get mixed up here?" Winter asked after a moment. "You like working for someone like Naught?"

"Colonel Naught," Quinn corrected. "It's a job. What's it to you?"

"Nothing," Dave Winter told him. "Just that Connie McDaniels seems like a nice kid. I hate to see her mixed up in this thing."

"Connie can take care of herself."

"Sure. Against a man with a room full of guns. Tell me, does Naught know how to shoot them all?"

"He's an expert shot with almost every gun in his collection," Quinn replied stiffly.

They stepped back into the air conditioned glitter where Mrs. Simmons ruled. She swept forward as soon as she saw them, an instant of concern crossing her face. Winter was aware for the first time of how her wide mouth contributed to a vague sensual quality. Was it Aristotle who'd first observed that in women?

"Where is Colonel Naught?" she asked.

"He's coming," Quinn said. "I think Mr. Winter is leaving."

"That's right," Winter said.

Mrs. Simmons had regained both her composure and her proprietary air. "I do hope you enjoyed yourself, Mr. Winter. Can you find your way out?"

"Yes, thank you." He left them and threaded his way among the little groups of white-suited men and ball-gowned ladies. Near the doorway he spotted Connie deep in conversation with a fatherly type and waited a moment till he could edge her aside.

"I was looking for you," she accused.

"Naught was showing off his gun collection. Look, I'm going. Any chance of borrowing your car?"

"I'll drive you back. It's not that far into town."

"What'll Quinn say?"

She shrugged. "He has to stay with the colonel anyway."

"Then he is a bodyguard."

"It's no concern of yours what he is," she said. "Are you coming?"

He followed her out to the car and climbed in beside her. She took the road back to town in a reckless, abandoned way, as if suddenly anxious to be rid of him. He'd said something to offend her, something about Quinn.

"I'm sorry," he told her finally, as the lights of the city came into view. "I've no right to question your personal life. I've no right to even be here."

"Do any of us have a right to be here?" she asked sharply. "Did the people of Quatronova invite Colonel Naught here? Did they even invite me, really, or the Peace Corps? They're just people who want to be left alone, and we've brought them a slice of the Twentieth Century. We've brought them maybe the seeds of their own damnation."

"Colonel Naught?"

"All of us! All of us who think we're so much better than they are!"

The car skidded to a stop before his hotel.

"I'd like to buy you a drink," Winter said.

"Thanks, but I have to get back."

"I'm flying to Miami in the morning. It's been nice knowing you, Connie."

For a moment she leaned over toward him, across the seat, and he might have kissed her. Then the instant passed, and she said simply, "I'll be seeing you again. Nobody leaves Quatronova that easily."

He watched the car roar away down the street, watched until the twin red taillights disappeared around the corner. Then he crossed the lobby and went up the dim stairway to his room.

It was not until he was in the room, reaching for the light switch, that he heard the woman's voice at his elbow and realized someone had been waiting there for him.

"Keep it dark, Mr. Winter. I must talk to you."

"Who—?"

"You may not remember me. I'm Izzo Naught's wife."

DAVE WINTER sat down on the bed, facing her in the darkness, wondering if she might have a pistol pointing unseen at his stomach.

"What do you want?" he managed to ask.

"I need help. When I heard you were here, I knew you were one person I could trust. I remember Izzo after the trial, cursing you for two days straight."

"He didn't like me then, and I don't think he likes me now. That's why I'm on my way back

to Miami. The job doesn't mean that much to me."

"I was hoping you could help me," she said, her voice cracking a bit as she spoke. "He's a bad man, an evil man. The children and I have been in hiding from him, trying to leave the country. Do you know what he's doing up there in the hills?"

"He seems to be a great party-giver."

"Mrs. Simmons," the voice spoke the name bitterly. "I know about her. But you must know about all the land his development company is acquiring. Do you remember the Bay of Pigs, Mr. Winter?"

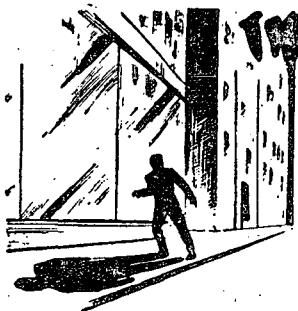
"The Cuban thing? Are you trying to tell me your husband is raising a private army up in the hills, Mrs. Naught? Somehow that doesn't fit in with the picture of an exiled rackets boss."

"No, nothing like that. He—" Her voice was cut short by a gentle knocking at the door.

Dave Winter froze for an instant, and then grasped for her in the darkness, feeling the soft fabric of her dress beneath his fingers as he guided her to the closet. Then he went to the door and opened it a crack. "Yes?"

"A message for you," the desk clerk said, looking bored.

Winter accepted the folded piece of paper and closed the door. Mrs. Naught came out of



the closet but he motioned her to silence and took the note to the window where he could read it by the light from the street.

Be at Quatronova Imperial lobby two a.m., the message read. It was unsigned. He glanced at his watch. It was nearly one thirty.

"What is it?" Mrs. Naught asked.

"More games. Look, you'd better go. I have the feeling I'm being watched."

"My husband is a dangerous man, Mr. Winter."

Dave Winter had to ask her the question. "He killed Chief Dwyer, didn't he?"

"Of course."

"Did you lie about the bridge game?"

"No. But he killed Dwyer, nevertheless."

"Would you testify to that in a court of law?"

"You know a wife can't be made to testify against her

husband. Besides, you'd never get him back there for trial."

"Then what do you want me to do?"

"There are people in Quatronova who are anxious to be rid of him. They won't trust me, but they would trust someone like you."

For a moment the lights from the street caught her face at the window, and he was reminded of the high, firm cheekbones and graying hair he'd seen those days in the courtroom.

"Who are these people?" he asked her.

"Who knows? They are paid by Washington. This time my husband is into something over his head."

"Where are you and the children hiding?"

"With a friend who lives near the airport. Don't worry. I'll be in touch with you."

"I was leaving in the morning," he reminded her.

"Stay—for forty-eight hours. By that time, who knows?"

"I'll see. I can't promise anything."

He let her out the door and watched her progress down the rear stairway. Then he went back to his room to wait.

At five minutes before two a cool night breeze was blowing across the grassy triangle in front of the Quatronova Imperial Hotel. The streets were all but

deserted, and Dave Winter could see only a sleepy cab driver lounging against his vehicle and a strolling couple a block further down the street. It was not a city for nightlife.

He crossed the damp pavement, still wet from some midnight street-cleaning, and entered the lobby of the Imperial exactly at two a.m. He remembered it from his previous visit with Connie McDaniels, but now at night it too was only vast and empty and very quiet. An elevator boy chatted with the desk clerk, and that was all.

Though the note had been unsigned, the choice of the Imperial lobby made him half expect Connie, and he sat down to wait for her, his back against a vast mirrored pillar in the center of the lobby. He didn't have long to wait, but it wasn't for Connie.

Winter noticed suddenly that the desk clerk and the elevator boy had vanished, leaving him completely alone in the big lobby. Then he turned toward the side and saw Johnny Quinn walking across the thick carpet toward him, with two hard-faced strangers. Only Izzo Naught would set up a killing in the lobby of the city's best hotel.

Winter was on his feet and running, toward the broad marble staircase that led to the street. Behind him, he heard Quinn shout, "Winter! Stop!"

But he didn't stop. He kept running, out onto the street where safety might still be possible, expecting at any moment to hear the thudding of bullets behind him. He crossed the park, zagging between the trees as he went, running till the breath came hard in his lungs and he had to stop. He turned to risk a look and saw that they'd followed him into the street but no further.

He didn't go back to his room that night. He walked for an hour and finally caught a little sleep on a bench at the bus station. In the morning he would have to do something. In the morning he would have to make an effort to stay alive.

TIRED AND unshaven, Dave Winter went back to his hotel room at dawn and found Connie McDaniels sitting in front of the entrance, tanned bare legs straddling her motor bike.

"I wanted to see you again before you left," she said simply.

"You're the one who said I wouldn't go," he told her. "Maybe you were right."

"Where've you been?"

He ran a hand over tired eyes. "Since I saw you last? Well, I've had a chat with Izzo Naught's wife. And your friend Quinn tried to kill me. Is that enough?"

"I don't believe it!"

He glanced around at the

awakening city. "Look, I don't like carrying on conversations in the middle of the street. Let's go inside or something."

"Hop on the back of my seat and I'll give you a ride. There's room."

He straddled the bike behind her, arms around her waist, as she throttled the motor into life. The morning air rushed at him and he squinted his eyes against the force of it. Soon they had left the center of town behind and moved into the dingy, crowded outskirts. Here in Quatronova the poor still lived in the suburbs. The highways and cars had not yet come in enough abundance for the upper classes to move there. Only a rare one like Izzo Naught could keep up a house in the country.

"It's a beautiful morning," she shouted against the wind.

"This is far enough. Let's stop and talk before I get blown away."

She nodded and wheeled off the road, guiding the machine to a stop in a little group of mangrove trees. Beyond, down a little hill, was a marshy lake he hadn't seen before.

"It's nice here," he said.

"Quatronova is a wonderful country. If it had a seaport it would be the biggest tourist attraction in Central America."

"Naught's wife seems to think he's up to something, buying all

that land for his development company."

"She's jealous of Mrs. Simmons."

"Shouldn't she be?"

Connie thought about that. "Oh, I suppose so, but that doesn't mean you can believe everything she tells you."

"One thing she told me was that Naught really did kill that police chief."

"And you believed her. She might have done it herself, you know."

"Why?"

"Why would he?"

"You have to understand a man like Naught, and I'm afraid you're too young to, Connie. When a man feels he's above the law, as Izzo Naught does, and comes to resent those who might interfere with his plans, he sometimes strikes out at them with no real motive except revenge. Chief Dwyer was in Naught's way, so he was removed."

"If I believed that, then you and Mrs. Naught would both be in danger from him."

"I think we are. She's staying well hidden, and I told you about your friend Quinn last night. He and two other hoods tried to kill me right in the Imperial lobby."

"I can't believe that."

"Look into his eyes sometime, a time when he's not

making love to you. They're the eyes of a killer."

"Are you such an expert?"

"I'm getting to be. Just to stay alive. Naught brought me here on a whim, and he can kill me for no better reason. I know him."

She rolled over on the grass and looked up at the sky. "We should be getting back."

"Yes."

There was nothing more to be said between them. He had struck out at Quinn and could not be forgiven for it. They rode back to his hotel almost in silence, and did not speak of meeting again.

By noon he had packed his bags and phoned the airport to check on the flights, and yet he was not forgetting the half promise he'd made to Mrs. Naught. Forty-eight hours, she'd wanted him to stay. Forty-eight hours. He could be dead and buried in that time.

The phone by his bedside jingled into life and he picked it up. It was Mrs. Naught.

"I've been trying to reach you all morning," she said.

"Hello. I was just thinking about you. What's up?"

"He knows where I've been hiding. He sent that gunman, Quinn, here this morning. I think I'm being watched, and I'm afraid to go out."

"The children?"

"They left on the morning flight for Mexico City, thank heaven."

"What did Quinn want?"

"Just to locate me. He said Izzo would be along later."

"Tell me your address."

"It's 108 Rio, near the airport. A little white house." He could hear the planes taking off in the background. "Listen, Mr. Winter, I have to tell you—"

"What?"

"...about the bases...the CIA..."

"The planes, Mrs. Simmons. I can't hear you."

"Wait I'll close the window."

He heard her put down the phone and waited for the roar of the planes to subside. He waited three minutes and still he could hear them. After five minutes he hung up the telephone and went downstairs for a taxi.

It took him fifteen minutes to reach the address she'd given him. The front door was locked, and he went around to the open window facing the landing field. Out here, few of the houses could afford screens on the windows. He peered over the sill and saw her crumpled on the floor, ten feet from the telephone. The right side of her skull was crushed in, much as Chief Dwyer's had been.

He felt sick, and he leaned against the house until the feeling passed. Then he started

looking for the blood-stained rock he knew would be somewhere near.

Sometimes a person had to stop running. Sometimes a person had to take a stand, even if it might be his last. Mrs. Naught was dead, and Dave Winter could not fly out of Quatronova without having done something about it. The anger that boiled within him was an anger for her living children, and for a lot of people he didn't even know.

He took a car out to Mrs. Simmons' house, bulky and unreal by daylight. "He's not here," she told him, blocking the doorway.

"I think he is. Connie's motor bike is outside, and that means Quinn, and that probably means Naught."

"Go away."

"You've got a sexy mouth, Mrs. Simmons, but get out of my way."

She half moved aside and he pushed the rest of the way. He walked quickly across the room to the big double doors he remembered, and then down toward the gun collection. That was where he would find Izzo Naught.

"Wait!" Mrs. Simmons called out after him. "You don't know what you're doing. He'll kill you."

Dave Winter kept on walking,

into the room where Izzo Naught stood carefully polishing the barrel of an Italian army rifle. "Well, Mr. Winter! Back again!"

Quinn was there too, and Connie. The young man's eyes were like cold steel, but Winter was banking on the hope that he'd make no move in front of the girl.

"What do you want, Winter?" Quinn asked.

"I thought Colonel Naught might want to know that his wife's dead. She was murdered this noon."

Connie gasped, but the other two didn't change expression.

"That's too bad," Naught said. "I'm sorry to hear it. Might you have had a hand in it, Mr. Winter?"

"She died the same way Dwyer did."

"Must we try that case all over again, really?"

"We're going to try it," Dave Winter said. "Right here and now. I couldn't convince eleven jurors of your guilt, but maybe at least I can convince Connie here."

Mrs. Simmons was behind him in the doorway, and the other three were facing him. He felt closed in, menaced, but he kept on talking because only his words could save him now.

"Your wife told me some things before she died, Colonel. Enough so I can guess what sort

of scheme you were up to. She said you were buying up land in the interior, and she mentioned the CIA and the Bay of Pigs. The CIA planes supporting the Bay of Pigs invasion took off from near here, didn't they? Right across the border in Nicaragua. I remember you showing me on the map what an ideal spot Quatronova was in, Colonel. I couldn't believe you were training your own army, but then I realized you wouldn't have to. Mrs. Naught told me some people—people in the pay of Washington—were opposing you. And before she died she mentioned bases."

"She always talked too much," Izzo Naught said.

"In a country of mountains and jungle like this, there must be only limited areas away from the populated regions where planes could take off and land. Your Quatronova Development Corporation bought up all the likely spots, and now you're—what?"

Izzo Naught chuckled. "I'm renting it to them, of course! A pure business deal, nothing else. I have the government in one hand and the land in the other. The CIA can have all the bases and training grounds they like in Quatronova, at a million dollars a year for every hundred acres."

Dave Winter nodded. "And there'll be no questions asked in

Congress or the press, because the CIA's budget is secret. But I can't imagine them letting you get away with it."

"They have no choice. Do you know how many Chinese there are in Mexico right now? Some say almost a quarter of a million. If the CIA doesn't rent my land, it goes to the Red Chinese and the Cubans. Money is money."

Dave Winter turned toward Connie and saw that the revelations had stunned her. But the others, Mrs. Simmons and Quinn, listened in grim-faced silence. It was not news to them.

"Your wife was trying to stop you, Izzo. She was helping the CIA, trying to find a dent in your armor. When you brought me in for your little joke, she tried to get me to help. So you killed her, just like you killed Dwyer back in the states. When she walked over to the window to close it, you were waiting. You, Izzo, not Quinn—because I doubt if you'd trust even him with your foolproof murder method. You see, we all surmised at the trial that the killer struck Chief Dwyer with a rock held in his hand. But David wasn't holding the rock that killed Goliath."

Izzo Naught tried to smile, but it came harder. "You think I had a sling like he did?"

"I think you had a crossbow—

that one on the wall—all loaded in advance. You walked out on your terrace, picked it up, sighted and fired. It could easily hurl a smooth rock over a hundred yards. They even outfit crossbows with telescopic sights these days. The whole thing only took an instant, and you were back at the card table. You used the same method to kill your wife this noon."

"Can you prove that?"

"I think if we examine the crossbow right now we might find scratches where the sight was attached to it. And Quinn told me you were an expert on all these weapons." Dave Winter turned to a stark, staring Connie McDaniels. "Is that enough proof for you?"

She managed a nod. "I—yes—"

Dave Winter bowed from the waist. "The prosecution rests its case."

"Kill him," Izzo Naught said quietly to John Quinn.

It happened fast, and yet every motion was like the slowed image of a moving picture. Johnny Quinn's hand came out from under his coat, holding a blue steel revolver, and the weapon passed over Connie and Mrs. Simmons and finally Dave Winter, and kept going until it pointed at Izzo Naught's head. And then Johnny Quinn squeezed the trigger.

"WE HAVE A plane waiting at the airport," Quinn said quietly. "It will take you both to Miami."

"Johnny, I don't want to go!" Connie still clung to him, even though something had ended.

"You have to, Connie. Naught had a lot of friends here." He turned to Dave Winter. "Take care of her, will you?"

"Sure." And then, uncertainly, "About last night in the Imperial lobby—"

"If you'd let us talk to you, we might have acted before he killed his wife."

"I didn't know."

"All right. The two men who were with me—you'll see them on the plane. Don't run this time."

"Why didn't you kill him before?" Dave Winter asked.

Quinn shrugged. "I'm just a guy, like you or him. It was hard

to squeeze that trigger until you convinced me he'd killed two people with his own hands."

"What about Mrs. Simmons?" They could still hear her sobbing from the next room.

"I'll have to ask Washington," Quinn said. "I don't want to make the decision."

Dave Winter nodded and led Connie McDaniels away, down the long corridor and out into the afternoon sunshine. Neither of them said good-by.

"You were right," she said to Winter, her head against his chest. "He was a killer. It was in his eyes."

"Johnny? Yes, but not the way I figured. He's on our side."

She paused and looked back at the house, and at the whole of it.

"Does it make any difference, Dave?" she asked. "Does it ever make any difference?"



EAGLEHAWK

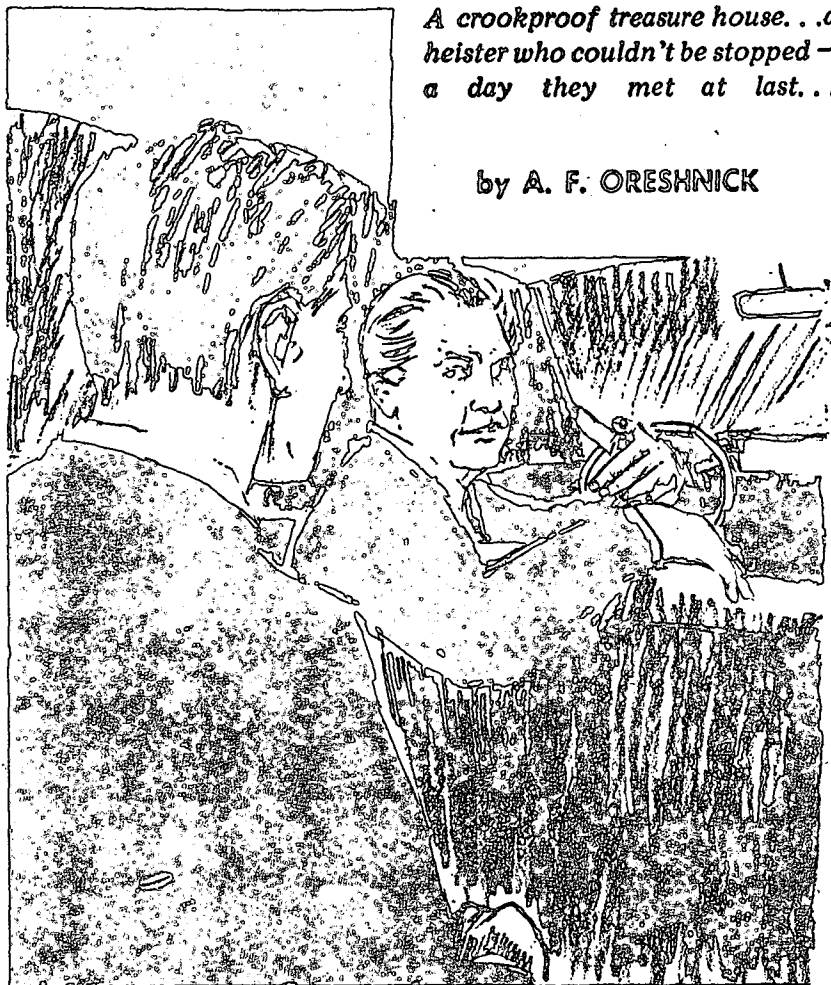
by REUBEN F. VIGIL

A New Truly Different Short Story Next Month

BREAKING INTO THE BIG TIME

A crookproof treasure house... a heister who couldn't be stopped — a day they met at last...

by A. F. ORESHNICK



A SEVENTEEN STORY building housing the offices and showrooms of hundreds of wholesale and retail diamond

merchants is certain to attract the attention of thieves.

It attracted mine.

The building had only one

entrance, though, and it was heavily guarded. Only people with appointments were admitted.

In addition, each tenant was connected to an alarm system which was far too sophisticated for even an expert to circumvent. Whenever a door was opened anywhere in the building, the guards at the entrance had to be notified immediately or the building would be sealed until the reason was learned for the non-notification.

I had been studying the Diamond Center for years, but I hadn't been able to think of a way to rob it and get away. My partner and I had to content ourselves with a diet of gas station and liquor store holdups, spiced by an occasional loan company heist. We weren't getting rich, but we were eating.

I knew that if we were ever going to break into the big time it was me who would have to find the way. My partner, Art "Steamroller" Lewis, couldn't cut it. He hardly had walking-around sense. If I hadn't done all his thinking for him, he'd have wound up in a home for the feeble-minded.

Lewis had been quite an athlete at one time. He had even played pro football for a year before his head got scrambled in an automobile accident. After three months in a coma he'd

awakened with a permanently slack jaw, eyes that had a tendency to look two ways at once, and the brain of a ten-year-old.

In one year Lewis had gone from driving a canary-yellow convertible to carrying a shoe-shine kit from bar to bar. That's when I saw him and took him under my wing.

Sure, I planned to use him, but I felt sorry for the big moron, too. I'd always figured that a man who couldn't help himself couldn't help me, but I made an exception in his case.

Teaming up with Steamroller wasn't the worst decision I ever made. We made a fair living, even though the big buck eluded us. Also, we got along pretty well. Steamroller's only interests were sports and athletics while mine were whiskey and women, but at least we didn't get in each other's way.

The afternoon I finally figured out how to pull a robbery at the Diamond Center, Steamroller was in the park a few blocks away from the apartment we shared. I drove over to pick him up, since I'd already told him it was time to take care of a few hardware stores we'd been casing.

When I parked beside the large playing field, Steamroller was talking to half a dozen kids.

As I watched, he broke away

from them and ran a zig-zag pattern, then looked back as one of the boys threw a football. Steamroller pulled it down with one huge hand and went loping back to the boys with a big grin on his scarred face.

Steamroller saw me in the car, finally, and came over to me, dragging his feet like a kid on his way to the dentist.

"Aww, do we hafta go to work already?" he asked. "I was havin' fun."

"Work's postponed," I told him. I got out of the car, took off my necktie and suitcoat, and laid them across the seat. Then I clapped my hands and held them out. "Let's see that football."

I spent the rest of the afternoon playing football with Steamroller and the kids. He taught me how to throw the ball with my fingertips on the laces so I'd have maximum control. I learned to throw a wobbly pass with ten percent accuracy, not bad for a forty-year-old who had never done anything more athletic than run ten yards to a getaway car.

The next day I was stiff and sore but I got busy throwing the ball again. My control began to improve, and as a receiver Steamroller was nothing short of phenomenal. If I was able to put it where he could get a hand on it, he caught it every time.

He and I went to the park



every day for a week. He didn't turn me into a Joe Namath, but I improved to the point I was confident I could do the job I had in mind done successfully.

Steamroller thought we'd finally found a mutual interest. He was so pleased he never stopped to wonder why we weren't pulling any capers. Then I told him what I had in mind, and his face fell like an elevator with a broken cable.

"I thought we were havin' fun playin' in the park," he complained. "Now it turns out

we were working' all the time. That's not fair."

"You enjoyed yourself, didn't you? So stop griping."

That night in the apartment I opened one of the seams of a new football, removed the rubber bladder, and sewed a zipper fastener into the hall.

Lewis watched me with all the disapproval of a man whose pet corn had been stamped on. I ignored his mood and explained my plan again. I had to be sure he understood his part in it.

In the morning I telephoned one of the dealers at the Diamond Center and made an appointment for later in the day. Then I went over the plans one last time—Steamroller could never get too much coaching. When he was able to answer my questions satisfactorily, it was time to stop talking and start doing.

We drove to the Diamond Center and split up. I got past the guards in the lobby without any trouble. They checked a list which confirmed my appointment, and they let me pass. I took the elevator to the fourteenth floor, standing in the rear of the car, where I could stick on a pair of false sideburns and a bushy mustache without being noticed.

I walked down the corridor, reading the names on doors, until I came to one of the better-

known wholesalers. I knocked, and one of the men inside looked out at me with raised eyebrows. I smiled, and he opened the door a crack.

"Merkrant Brothers," I mentioned one of the names I'd seen on the doors, "sent me to you. I'm looking for pear-shaped stones of about three carats."

The man let me in and called the entrance to cancel the alarm that had gone off automatically when the door opened. When he turned around, I let him look down the barrel of my little .32 automatic. I marched him over to the other employees, made them all lie down on the floor behind a display case, and tied them hand and foot. Then I got busy with more important things.

I pulled the deflated football from a pocket and went down the rows of display cases, stuffing the largest, most expensive diamonds and set pieces into the zippered opening. After that I went to the open vault and dumped a few trays of unset gems into the football, too. When I finished, the ball was three-quarters filled with the most valuable merchandise I could find. I added my pistol and disguise, then zipped it shut.

When I opened the door to leave the showroom, I knew an alarm was being sounded again. I wasted no time getting to the

stairway and climbing to the landing between the fourteenth and fifteenth floors. There was a window there which opened on an alley far below. I opened it and stuck my head out.

Steamroller was waiting right where he was supposed to be. I hefted the ball once and kissed it for luck. Then I lobbed a perfect spiral pass directly at him. I saw Steamroller plant his feet firmly as though he expected to be tackled immediately after catching the ball. I closed the window and got out of there.

I proceeded at once to the fifteenth floor and my appointment there. I bought three small stones and spent half an hour doing it. There was activity with security people rushing about in the corridor, but I paid more attention to it than anyone else did. When I returned to the first floor, I had to submit to a search along with everyone else who was leaving the building, but since nothing was found on me that couldn't be explained, I wasn't detained more than a couple of minutes.

I went directly to the apartment and called Steamroller's name as I entered, but there was no answer. I watched a TV show, and he still hadn't shown up. I figured he was probably standing in front of a sporting good store window, drooling.

I was getting a beer from the refrigerator when I heard the familiar sound of his key in the lock.

"Hey, stupid, where've you been?" I called. "Let's see what the score looks like."

I went into the living room and found half a dozen plainclothesmen out there waiting for me.

"Hello, stupid," one said as he snapped cuffs on my wrists.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked innocently.

"Stupid," another one said. "Since the doors of the Diamond Center are connected to an alarm, you should've known the windows would be, too. We checked the rear alley and found your partner. You must not know much about the laws of physics. When that football hit, it must have been going a couple hundred miles an hour. Steamroller made a perfect catch, but his chest was crushed. He died almost instantly."

So the robbery at the Diamond Center was a failure, but I made the big time anyway. Whenever someone is killed during the commission of a crime, it's murder. Felony murder, and that's still as big time as you can get in our more circumscribed institutions.

And my fingerprints were all over that football.

The Code of The Blue Commune

*They were the soul people, life's happy hooligans
and no one could break into their hippy life. No
one but a big kid. Very handsome—very dead. . .*

by EDWIN SCHORB

THE TRIBE woke up that morning to the bright hard sun of the Arizona winter sky. That is—all but one of the Tribe woke to that sun. One slept on, and would sleep on through eternity.

The one who slept was known as Little Lamb. No one knew what his real name was. He had come from the East with some others who had gone on to the West. Little Lamb had stayed. He had stayed because he had fallen in love with Ketchup, the red-haired mystery girl. Some said that Ketchup had come from the East, where she had been a groupie, a camp-follower of rock musicians. Others said that she had come from the West, where she had lived on the

Bohemian beaches of Southern California.

Ketchup was a mystery girl, not because she said nothing about herself, but because she told so many stories, many of which were contradictory, that no one knew what to believe about her. It was of no great importance, however, to the Tribe, that both Little Lamb and Ketchup did nothing to clarify their histories. It was an unwritten code of the Tribe, or the Family, as it was variously known, not to ask questions.

It was left to Marshal Tom McCool to do the necessary questioning, and unfortunately one of the two persons who might be able to spread some

A GRIPPING STORY OF TOMORROW'S LOST CHILDREN



light on the subject was dead. "Poor Little Lamb," as Ketchup had put it.

'Poor Little Lamb' had been six and a half feet tall, dark-bronzed faced, blue-eyed, handsome as a star, and heavily be-wooled about the head and face. 'Poor Little Lamb' had been an outsized 'Christ-figure', according to some.

"He's a land-locked Billy Budd," as one of the Family put it.

"Why would anyone want to insert a ten-inch dagger in his throat?" asked Marshal McCool. "I thought you people were anti-violence, all for love, like."

"We're just people, Marshal." Ketchup threw a pair of pretty, pink-palmed hands out. "We are trying to get away from your kind of violence, but we grew up in your world, and the violence of that world is in us just as it's in you. The difference is, that we're trying to get away from it, in our heads and in our life-style."

"My kind of violence! Look, Miss, I came here to your flower heaven to investigate a murder. Not the other way around, if you please. Now, you say you don't know Little Lamb's real name or where he came from, but people around here say that he was in love with you. I would imagine that you might know something about a man that was in love

with you. Isn't there anything you can tell us?"

"Little Lamb broke the code, I can tell you that."

"The code?"

"Yes, the code. Little Lamb had no right to love me. I mean special like that. Here we all love each other the same way. We women are married to all the men, all the men are our husbands. Little Lamb wanted me all to himself. He broke the code. Otherwise there never would have been violence. He made the violence happen. I'm only surprised that it was he who was killed. I half expected him to kill somebody else. He had returned to the standards of your world."

"You didn't return his love?"

"I loved him as I love all my husbands. But he spoiled my love for him."

"Did he break the code right from the beginning? How long has he been here?"

"No. At first he was like all of us. He told me once that he loved our way of life. That was after he'd been here a month or so. He would have been here around six months, now, I guess."

"Now, look, Ketchup, I'm looking for a motive. Somebody put a shiv in Little Lamb's throat. Somebody had a reason for doing that. Money means nothing to you people, or so you



say, and I'm sort of inclined to believe you, within certain limits. So why did Little Lamb get it? Did one of your people go ape on acid and perform a human sacrifice?"

"We're not lunatics here."

"It can happen, can't it?"

"It can, yes. But that's a whole different thing. We don't go in for the spooky stuff. We're not like that."

"Well, you people have been around here for over a year, and I must admit I haven't heard of any of that-type of thing taking place out here. But there's a first time for everything, isn't there?"

"No. Not here. These are gentle kids. Real love children."

"Okay. Let's say, for the sake of argument that nobody went ape on acid or satanism. Money's out—and that leaves love. Or, more accurately, love's angry side, jealousy. Do you agree?"

"I don't like to, but I think it must be that. It could be one of the other wives who was in love with Little Lamb and jealous of his love for me."

"I think that it's more likely that it's one of the other husbands. Think about it, Ketchup. Who among the husbands, besides Little Lamb, seemed like he might be on the verge of breaking the code? In other words, was there anyone else who had a special love for you?"

"Well, maybe Mooncalf. Mooncalf seemed not to love Little Lamb as he should. And Mooncalf did come to me more than to the other wives. We held a council once, and he was—well, we all sort of talked to him about it. You know, we rapped it out and he seemed to dig. After that, he was more regular."

"When was that?"

"Oh, a month or so ago. I'd forgot all about it."

"Why wasn't Little Lamb talked to at a council?"

"He was. Twice. But it didn't do any good. He had been divorced by all the wives and ordered out of the Tribe."

"Why was he still here?"

"Well, he just wouldn't go. There wasn't anything much we could do about it. We couldn't use violence to make him go."

"Somebody finally did."

"That's not funny, Marshal."

"I didn't mean it to be."

"Well, we had to feed him. He was a human being. We couldn't just let him starve."

AFTER THE questioning of Ketchup—whose real name turned out to be Tania Brady—Marshal McCool called in the young man known as Mooncalf. McCool had seen Mooncalf in town a couple of times: a bearded, curly-haired, lanky kid of nineteen or twenty, with a look of perpetual pain on his face.

"Look, fuzz," said Mooncalf as he stepped inside the kitchen tent which McCool was using as a kind of operations room, "I had nothing to do with this thing. I don't know what that flaming witch of a Ketchup has been telling you, but if anybody knows who killed Little Lamb it's her. Maybe she did it herself."

"That's a serious charge," said McCool, an expression of mild surprise on his face. "Why do you make it?"

"Because Little Lamb was going to leave for the West Coast today, and he wasn't going to take her with him."

"You're saying that she was in love with Little Lamb?"

"Of course she was. Did she deny it?"

"Well, according to Ketchup, Little Lamb was in love with her. She said that he had been making

a nuisance of himself and had been expelled from the commune."

"She's a liar! Little Lamb was the most Christ-like person I've ever known. He could never make a nuisance of himself in any way. He was going to leave the Tribe because she wouldn't let him alone. All the other wives and husbands were upset about it. Little Lamb belonged to everybody, but she started everybody fighting over him by trying to claim him all for herself. That's why he was leaving, to help us all find peace again. He was good. A real saint."

"And you think that Ketchup killed him because he was going away without her?"

"Yes. She begged him not to leave her. She must have lost that temper of hers last night and stabbed him."

"She thinks you did it."

"Sure, she has to blame somebody. She never loved me as she should have, so I'm the goat."

"I'm afraid the goat has already been sacrificed."

"I dig," said Mooncalf, and sulked out, following the line of Marshall McCool's gesture.

The third person Marshal McCool questioned that morning was the Tribe's elected leader, a tall, burly man who was called Father Time.

"I've heard your people refer

to your camp as the Blue Commune," McCool said. What does that signify?"

"That signifies under the sky, man; it means Nature, love on a mountaintop. But what's that got to do with Little Lamb gettin' his throat opened?"

"Nothing," said McCool, "except by irony. Nature, love, and a man named Little Lamb with a ten-inch dagger in his throat!"

"This don't happen around here every day, you know," said Father Time. He was decidedly defensive, thought McCool, but it did not necessarily read as an attitude of guilt. It appeared to McCool that Father Time was genuinely upset that ill-fame of any sort should come to the Blue Commune.

This followed, thought McCool.

In the past, these people had stayed out of the way of the local people and had caused the authorities no trouble. McCool knew that there were drugs all over the place, but why stir up trouble? So long as the local people had no complaints, he would leave the Blue Commune alone.

But now things would have to be different, and Father Time knew it.

"Look, Father Time," said McCool, "I've never bothered you or your people, have I?"

"No, you been straight,"

replied Father Time, rather grudgingly.

"Well, it comes to this: I can't promise anything, but I'll do my best to see that this thing doesn't blow up too big, if you'll play it straight with me."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Tell me whatever you know about this, naturally. And make it straight."

"And what do we get back?"

"Anybody who isn't directly implicated can get a three-hour start toward the State line. That's all I can do, in a situation like this."

Living the way you do, the D.A. might be able to lock up the whole lot of you as conspirators, accomplices and accessories before and/or after the fact. And by this afternoon two-thirds of the county are going to be screaming for just that. If you want to get the innocent among you away clean, you'll tell me what you know. Otherwise—there's always the junk, too."

"What makes you think that the whole bunch of us freaks didn't get together and sacrifice Little Lamb to the sun god in an acid ritual?"

"Because he's just lying there in his tent with a ten-inch blade jammed to the hilt through his neck. That means that at least five inches of that blade are in

dirt. It might not have happened there, but that makes it look as if it did. And that isn't exactly the setting for a ritual murder. If you people were going to perform a ritual murder, you'd lay your victim out on a rock, wouldn't you? Or hang him on a cross. Something symbolic and comic-bookish, or don't I read your mentality correctly?"

"We're not idiots, McCool."

"You better hope that I keep on thinking you are. Now let's have what you know. For starters, was Little Lamb ordered out of camp, or was he going to leave on his own hook?"

"Neither, exactly. We all agreed, him and us, that if the ideals of the commune were going to survive, it would be better if he went away for a while. Say, McCool, if that blade is still in the ground, how'd you know it was ten inches long?"

"The scabbard matches the dagger. By the way, who owns, or owned, that knife?"

"Everybody. It belongs to the Tribe."

"That's what I figured. Would you mind telling me what you people use a ten-inch dagger for?"

"It's a religious thing, but not the kind of thing—"

"I told you, I dismissed that theory early on. But what did you do with that sword?"

"We cut grass with it."

"You mean pot? Marijuana?"

"Yeah. It grows wild all abouts here. In the summer, when it's growing, we go out at midnight and cut the stuff. The dagger was our official family cutter. Like a religious ritual. Dig?"

"Dig. Where was the knife kept?"

"We kept it right in the middle of the camp, tied to a cross. Anybody could take it."

"What about Little Lamb? Do you know anything about him? His real name?"

"No. He came to us six months ago. He came with friends. They went on. He stayed. He was a saint."

"That's all?"

"That's all. We don't ask questions."

"If he was ever fingerprinted, as seems likely, we'll know who he was by tonight or tomorrow morning."

"And what will you know then, McCool, a name? He'll still be Little Lamb."

"Did Little Lamb stay on here at the Blue Commune because he fell in love with Ketchup, Miss Brady, or for other reasons?"

"Not for Miss Brady."

"I've heard from some of your people that Little Lamb was in love with Ketchup. She even said that he was."

"Woman's vanity."

"And the others?"

"You the one that said they had comic book mentalities."

"You mean you people gossip about each other just like the people out in the big bad world?"

"We are human here, too."

"All too human, apparently. Father Time, I am becoming disillusioned with you flower people."

"We are only trying, McCool. That's more than the rest of you do."

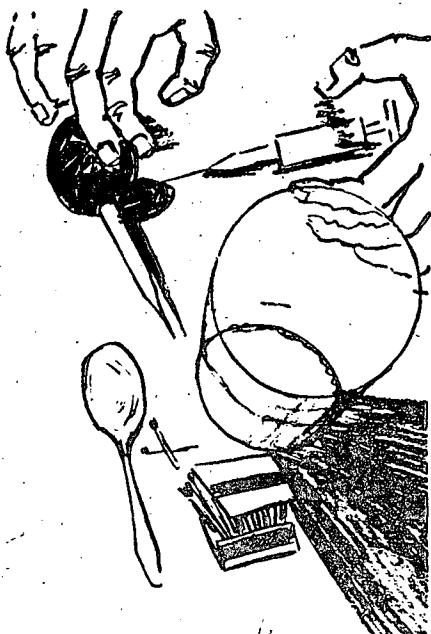
"What's your real name, Father Time? Your mother didn't christen you that, did she?"

"My name is Father Time. Furthermore, I have never been arrested. Neither have I been in the army. There is no way of ever identifying me as anybody but who I am—Father Time. So you might as well give up on that right now, McCool."

"Okay, for now. But as soon as I decide to know, I'll find out."

"How? Nobody in this camp knows my name. What are you going to do? Are you going to beat me with a rubber hose? Come on, McCool, I don't think you're the type. Forget it, I'm Father Time, that's all."

"Watch it, you might be Father Time in the State Pen for withholding evidence. Don't say I didn't warn you. Now, what about the dame, Ketchup? And



what about this kid, Mooncalf?"

"Ask me."

"Was there anything between them?"

"Mooncalf dug her. What can I say?"

"He was in love with her?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Was it—how do you people say it? A special thing, out of the code?"

"Maybe. Yeah, I guess."

"How did she feel about him?"

"He was only a kid to her, nothing. Just one of the husbands."

"He's turned on her now. He

seems to despise her. He appears to have worshiped Little Lamb."

"That's natural, ain't it? He'd come on like he dug Little Lamb, so nobody'd think he did it, wouldn't he?"

"Sounds good. Go on."

"Well, he comes on now like he hates Ketchup so's nobody thinks his loving her was a motive."

"He accused her of doing the job."

"He don't think anybody'll believe that."

"Why not?"

"'Cause no woman would have the strength to drive that knife through a big man's neck and five more inches into the dirt."

"Well, you're quite a detective, Father Time."

"I told you, we aren't idiots."

"So your bet is that Mooncalf was in love with Ketchup, and was afraid that she'd go off with Little Lamb, and, maybe in a fit of jealousy, killed him."

"I ain't saying that."

"But you are, by implication. But how do you account for the fact that Ketchup said that she was being annoyed by Little Lamb? If she loved him—"

"She's a smart girl. She would say that now, so as to stay clear of the trouble."

"Disown the whole thing. Is that it?"

"Makes sense, don't it?"

"Take a guess," said McCool suddenly, "how many people have you got in this camp?"

"You mean how big is our tribe?"

"That'll do."

"Don't know, exactly. Maybe seventy-five."

"And in the summer you go out at midnight and harvest that pot? All of you?"

"Yeah, so what?"

"That's quite a haul, isn't it? Father Time, you ain't gonna sit there and tell me that you people smoke all that pot. You sell it, don't you? You deal? Give it to me straight, Father Time. Remember that big pen."

"Okay, so we do a little dealing. You said you'd leave that alone."

"I said that if you came on straight I'd let whoever wasn't directly implicated in this murder get clear. But you're not playing it straight. Now let's have it. Who deals?"

"Okay, so I do the dealing. So what?"

"In other words, you lead that pack of comic-book people out to those fields in the moonlight and with your magic dagger start the harvest celebration, then the tribes goes to work and brings it in by the bushel. You do the diviying. The kids get a share to keep them happy and stupid and you store the rest away, for the benefit of the

tribe, only not really for their benefit, but to sell."

"I sell it to buy us all groceries. We've gotta eat like everybody else."

"Can it, Father Time. You sell enough stuff to supply the Army, Navy and Marine Corps with food for a century. I was told that you haven't been in camp for a few weeks. Where have you been?"

"All right. I've been in Mexico, and then in New York. Why bother to ask if you know?"

"Just wanted to hear you say it. You picked up heroin for pot money in Mexico and took the heroin to New York where you supplied dealers. Say yes."

"I ain't saying nothing else till I talk to my lawyer. You're a fink, McCool"

"And you're a Brady, Father Time. The New York police sent a copy of a certificate of marriage between a Miss Tania Armstrong and a Mr. Timothy Brady out here when you people first started the Blue Commune. The local citizenry wanted to know what kind of people were moving in among them. The report I made to the Chamber of Commerce dispelled a lot of fears. Just a married couple and a bunch of harmless hippie drop-outs."

"Now, Father Time, tell me what really happened? Did Little

Lamb and Ketchup get too close while you were away making deals? Those people that Little Lamb came here with—New York dealers? West Coast dealers? Were Little Lamb and Ketchup going to split out with the profits? You plunged that knife into Little Lamb's neck, Brady, and you and that fire-topped wife of yours decided to put it onto the kid, Mooncalf."

"That's right, Marshal. Now just sit tight while Tim puts some rope around you." Tania Brady held a hard, cold object to the back of McCool's neck. Tim Brady's face broke into a large, cheerful smile. He said: "Good girl."

"So," said McCool, "he runs a knife through your boyfriend's throat and the next morning you help him get away. You people of the Blue Commune have a strange code. Only the gutter-rats of the underworld know how it works."

"Shut up, McCool," said Tania; "you think I'm going to let you have Tim, because of what happened with Little Lamb! Yeah, I went for Little Lamb, in my fashion, but he's dead. I've been with Tim a long time; I ain't gonna cross him for the Establishment. Come on, Tim, tie him up."

"There are two other men from my office here. As soon as

they see you take off they'll be after you," said McCool.

"Sorry, McCool. Their car has four flat tires, and we'll take yours. How are they going to follow us? Run?"

"You've got a smart girl there, Brady. Maybe too smart. Keep an eye on her, or you're liable to end up like Little Lamb."

Suddenly McCool heard a scream and the sounds of a struggle behind him. Brady, who had been tying McCool's legs to the rungs of a chair, leaped to his feet, a horrified, stunned look on his face, and wavered uncertainly.

McCool dove, ramming a shoulder into Brady's midriff. Brady's chest came down on McCool's back. McCool heard the breath heave from Brady with a woosh. He sounded like a crushed bellows.

But McCool's left leg tangled in the loose ropes, and he was jerked to the floor like a roped steer.

Brady staggered backwards, clutching his stomach, his chest heaving. His eyes darted wildly from the sprawled McCool to the struggle that was taking place behind the lawman. McCool got to his feet, keeping his eyes fixed on Brady. Whatever was happening behind him had Brady plenty scared; and that was enough for McCool. McCool desperately tried to kick free of the rope that

entangled his boot. Brady was coming at him now.

McCool stepped sideways, dragging the chair with him. Then, just as his boot slipped free, Brady was upon him. The impact of Brady's short, cracking uppercut sent McCool sprawling. For an instant, he lay stunned, panting. He was able to lift his head in time to see Brady's heel vanish beyond the tent flap. He rolled over on his stomach and saw Tania Brady being slowly and methodically choked from behind by Mooncalf, who held the cheaply bejewelled scabbard of the ritual knife across her milk-white, slightly freckled throat.

The girl was still conscious, her fierce blue eyes rolling wildly, her throat clicking for air. Half of Mooncalf's face was buried in her fiery mane; the other half, the part that McCool saw, had gone mad, the tender boyish mouth torn down like a jagged scar, the eye a glinting coin.

McCool scooped up the pistol that Tania had dropped and, in a continuous motion, hooked the fingers of his free hand over the scabbard, and sent the pistol glancing off Mooncalf's temple.

McCool yanked at the scabbard, and Tania Brady dropped to the floor unconscious between himself and Mooncalf. With the speed of a cat, Mooncalf let go

the scabbard. McCool reeled backwards. Mooncalf kicked out, knocking the pistol from McCool's hand. Both went for the pistol. Mooncalf got it, and ran from the tent. McCool was on his heels.

Fifty feet away, McCool's Chevy, with Brady driving, was pulling off, heading for the town road. Mooncalf stopped short, whirled about, and caught McCool running, clipping him across the side of the head with the pistol. McCool's momentum, plus the blow, sent him sliding belly down. He looked up, drunkenly. Mooncalf raised the pistol in a straight-arm aim. He fired six times.

The shots echoed, whining back from the hills that surrounded the Blue Commune. They drummed against the clear, cold sky.

By the third shot, McCool's eyes were on the car. With the practiced eye of an expert marksman, he picked up the uneven line of punctures. He had counted to the third when he saw the fourth appear, a black pock on the car's white side.

The first shot smashed through the rear fender; the next, higher, through the rear door; the third hit the window of

that door, turning it milky; the fourth and fifth made a tight group at the top of the car.

The Chevy swerved and ran off the dirt road into a ditch. It sat rocking for a moment, then came a small puffing sound, and a long delicate wisp of flame rose from the hood. Suddenly the car vanished inside an angry red cloud.

The sound of the explosion rocked the Blue Commune.

Leading him back to the tent, McCool casually took the empty pistol from Mooncalf's limp hand.

The two troopers who had accompanied McCool, joined the denizens of the Blue Commune who were already gathering about the smoldering car. McCool didn't have to look. He knew. He had watched as the sixth bullet turned red on Father Time's right temple.

"Why did you do it?" the marshal said, eyeing Mooncalf doubtfully.

The boy, his downy face gleaming in the midday sun, breathed heavily several times, then said, in a shaky, quavering voice: "Don't you see? I loved Little Lamb and love is the most important thing in the Blue Commune."



trial by fury

Wisely and well had he planned his kill. Now he could be free. Free? One man had other ideas.

by

HERBERT HARRIS

IT WAS FIVE years since I'd seen Bill Carter, but he remembered my drink was scotch.

"Now you're back from the States," he said. "we must get together regularly."

"Yes," I agreed absently. Wandering about his bachelor apartment, I had come upon the portrait of Ann.

I had never quite got over being in love with Bill's sister, and her picture reawakened old memories.

He saw me looking at the picture, and the round red face that seemed to go with his large lumbering frame lost its smile.

"I suppose you know Ann's dead?" he said.

There was a sudden void in my stomach. "Dead?"

"It happened two years ago. Mark murdered her."

There was suddenly an oppressive silence in the room.

When Ann had thrown me over in favor of Mark Everett,

Bill had tried to talk her out of it. But he soon knew, as I did, that he was only wasting his time.

Mark was the complete opposite of Bill. None of the big hearty rugger-tye about Mark. He was thin, pale, gaunt, and, one guessed neurotic.

"I suppose he can't help having an unhappy home-life as a kid," Bill said, "but it's made him introspective. Ann reckons she'll be able to change all that, but she won't!"

I didn't argue with him—or with Ann for that matter. She had chosen Mark and I didn't despise her for it.

"Better drink your whisky," Bill said as I stood in silence looking at her portrait.

"I was fond of your sister," I told him.

Carter nodded grimly. "Everyone loved her — except her husband. I suppose that's what he disliked about her — everyone loved her. But everyone disliked *him*. So the bastard strangled her."

"They . . . they sentenced him, of course?"

"Sentenced him? No, they set the bastard free."

"I don't get you, Bill."

"I mean that Mark *knew* he could get away with murder. There would be plenty of convincing witnesses—his relatives, all the knowledgeable

witnesses—to say the whole thing was a terrible accident.

"His affliction was a cast-iron defence. The world would weep for *him*."

"His affliction?"

"Of course, you wouldn't know," Bill said. "Every since his childhood Mark had walked in his sleep."

"He had an older sister, Heather. One night, Heather woke up, screaming the place down. Mark had his hands around her throat. He was sleepwalking. He was only fifteen at the time. The psychiatrists trotted out the usual guff.

"His mother was a promiscuous nympho, they said. She deserted his father for another man. The boy developed . . . what was it? . . . 'violent tendencies below the level of consciousness' . . ."

"And Ann knew about this?"

"Yes, she knew. But love can blind us all, can't it?"

"Maybe she was happy enough when they were first married—though I was never sure about that. I do know that she was desperately unhappy afterwards.

"She told me once that Mark had started his sleepwalking again. Mark was a failed artist, you may remember.

"He had taken up commercial art, but made little money. Ann said he had been very worried,

and put the outbreak of sleepwalking down to that.

"And remembering what he had done to his sister Heather, I started worrying too—about Ann. I called on her one day and noticed a livid bruise on her face. She told me she'd skidded on a rug.

"I knew she was lying. Her eyes were red from weeping. I said, 'Let's have the truth—he's been knocking you about?'

She turned away.

"Nobody ever guessed they were unhappy—nobody but me. I *knew*, you see. I knew Mark hated her."

Bill dragged a large hand across his eyes, and I waited for him to go on, feeling sorry for him.

"Two years ago ... in the early hours of the morning ... he strangled her."

The bald statement made me wince.

"They never had to look for Mark, though. He went straight to the police station, whimpering and blubbering like a child, sobbing out, 'I killed her ... my darling little wife.'

He was a good actor, I'll give him that. At the trial he whipped up so much sympathy, I thought they might applaud him.

"The whole tragic story of Mark Everett was laid bare. His doctor and a well-known psychiatrist testified to his tragic

somnambulism. His sister Heather described how she had nearly been strangled herself.

"A most tragic accident, everyone said—even the jury. For a time, even I wondered if it could have been accidental."

"But it wasn't?" I stared at him across my scotch.

"After those sloppy sentimentalists had sent him out into the world again—with no punishment but occasional psychiatric treatment — I watched him and I never stopped watching him.

"With Ann out of the way, he was happy. He spent a lot of time with some blonde model."

"You mean," I said, "he had deliberately resumed sleepwalking as a preliminary to committing an 'accidental' murder?"

"Yes!"

"Where is he now?" I asked.

"A year ago," Mark went on, "he took up more serious painting again. He rented a cottage on top of a Cornish cliff.

"One night he walked in his sleep. They found his body, clad in pyjamas, smashed to pieces on the rocks below the cliff. They reckoned he walked straight off the cliff.

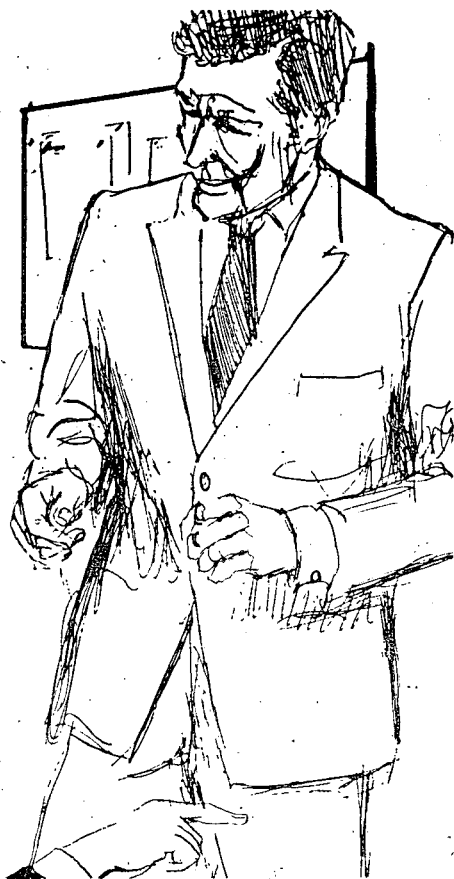
"I was there when it happened," Bill said. He gulped his drink and stood up. The ironic twist had come back to his mouth. "I had rented a cottage just a few yards from his ... How about another Scotch?"

CUTBACK

by

JERRY

JACOBSON



He was my friend, I his foe. Between us lay a lifetime opportunity. I nodded. There was only one thing to do...

IN HIS SMALL but comfortably appointed office on the second floor of Connover Tooling's administration building, Claude Moss treated his morning coffee like a Roman emperor

warned that the draught might be hemlock juice.

Agonizingly aware of what this afternoon would bring, he had gone to Harry's the previous afternoon and had proceeded to

tie on the biggest load of his young life. The inside of his mouth and its thick layer of cotton would only absorb the coffee before it would reach his stomach. And he didn't think he could stand the loud sound his throat would make when it swallowed.

There were positive signs on which to hang his fear. First, Miss Pearson had delivered him only coffee and no familiar green memo from Connover. And second, his telephone was remaining absolutely silent.

These things counted. The did not count for much, but they counted.

His office — the entire south wall of the Administration Building, for that matter — was connected to the plant proper, offering the employees Administration, Personnel and Time and Motion a sweeping view through glass of the plant's entire operation.

When Moss walked to it and peered down, the grim evidence was presented him like the images on a motion picture screen. In Section-A, six mock-ups of supersonic aircraft landing gear were being disassembled by two dozen tool-and-dye men and two white-smocked engineers. Beyond this activity, in Section-B, jet engines, meer shells of a

project projected as a two-year operation, lay idle and unattended as though they had become radio-active and contaminated.

Claude Moss wanted no more of the scene. He walked back to his desk and tried a bit of coffee. It went down like warm tar.

Once again his fingers lifted the management memo to his eyes. He read it as he had read it the last fifteen times, with some hope that he had missed a vitally important semantical clue that would give him reprieve.

To All Connover Tooling Employees:

As you are probably aware, last week's conclusive U.S. Senate vote to terminate all production on the controversial SST aircraft will have its affects on Connover Tooling employees involved in the sub-contracting phases of this contract.

Correspondingly, a twenty per-cent cutback in Connover Tooling employment will be necessary, effective April 1, 1971, and in accordance with employment contracts and trade union agreements.

All supervisors and section chiefs are instructed to implement the cutback in the strict terms handed down to them in the management decision.

Any employee with a just

grievance in this decision, should contact his union representative immediately, or write directly to Connover tooling.

*Sincerely,
Jonas T. Connover
President, Connover Tooling*

Moss' head was in his palms when Jesse Fothergill looked in to him. Fothergill was the senior member of their five-man Time and Motion Group and its chief. Moss was their newest. It didn't take a trip to a computer to learn that in this business, the last hired was the first fired. And what 20% of a five-man team was.

"Thought I'd pop in on you, to see how you were taking this business of the cutback," Fothergill said, "You look terrible."

"Yeah. I stopped in at The After last night."

Fothergill grinned. "Stopped in or camped out?"

"They either closed me off or I closed it up," Moss said groggily. "I don't remember which."

"Well, things are pretty much at a standstill here, anyway. Why don't you take the rest of the day off?"

"No, I think I'll stick around until everything hits the fan," Moss told him. "When does

Marchbank submit his recommendations to old man Connover?" Marchbank was their supervisor, as well as the foreman for six structural engineers on the project.

"He has to have the word out to Connover by noon," Fothergill told him.

"You put in your two cents worth already, I suppose."

"Me? Buddy, I don't have to save my job on this baby. I'm the senior man. It's you four guys who'll be doing all the sweating. Catch you at lunch in the cafeteria, Claude. And you better send a razor across that face of yours a few times. If old man Connover just happens to pop in on you for a chat for additional data to make a decision, he'll toss you out like a sheet of burned aluminum."

"I'll think about it."

"You'd better do more than think about it, Claude. Connover's already got a no-good kid in Berkley who looks like that."

After Fothergill left, Moss took his advice about sprucing up. He took his electric shaver from his desk and put on the closest, cleanest face of his life. While Miss Pearson was getting him some fresh coffee and a sweet roll, he downed three aspirin and dunked his face on a

sinkful of cold water and then changed into a fresh shirt.

A half hour later, Moss' headache had reduced itself to a mild twinge at the base of his neck and the small world around him had come back into focus. By that time he'd also finished off the sweet roll and a full cup of coffee, both which went a long way toward settling his butterfly stomach.

At ten o'clock he dialed Marchbank's extension and asked if he could stop by his office for a chat. He was busy with one of his engineers, Claude was told, but that he'd see him in fifteen minutes. Moss was more grateful than disappointed. The delay offered him a little more breathing room in which to draw his bearings, settle down, and go over his speech thoroughly in his mind.

At ten-fifteen, Claude Moss walked two doors down the hall to Everett Marchbank's office. His secretary was out to coffee, so Claude walked directly in. Marchbank was flying his hands over a mountain of fresh paperwork. He was smoking a cigar.

"Claude. Come in and sit down. Excuse the mess. This cut-back thing has got me right to the end of my rope."

"That's what I came to talk with you about, Ev."

"The cutback? Oh, yes. I've seen Gorman and Siddleman already this morning. I'm up to here with kids who need another quarter at college, sick mothers-in-law, and mortgages. Well, me may as well get this over with, Claude. That will leave only Havermeyer and Fothergill to talk to in the Time and Motion Section."

Claude Moss pulled his chair closer to Marchbank's desk in a gesture of apprehension. "It isn't so much myself I want to discuss as it is Jesse Fothergill. But then I guess the others have already brought it out into the open."

Marchbank stopped his paper shuffling.

"Brought what out into the open, Claude?"

"Let me begin by saying that I'm aware that sometimes the last-hired-first-fired-policy doesn't apply in matters where gross misconduct and incompetence are concerned."

Everett Marchbank leaned forward on his elbows. A light was flashing on one of the extensions but he ignored it. "Yes, that's generally true, Moss. If a senior employee's conduct and performance become grossly undesirable, he is usually the first

to be terminated. You say this is about Fothergill?"

"Then, the others haven't mentioned it to you."

"No, not a word. What's this all about, Moss?"

Claude Moss pursed his lips to indicate the difficulty with which he now had to speak. "Everett, I'm making this plea now, only because Fothergill's situation is no doubt a matter of record throughout the company."

"Plea?"

"Considering that a decision by you has already been made concerning the one man to be terminated from our Time and Motion Group, I ask you now to rescind that decision and accept my resignation instead."

Everett Marchbank was stroking his jaw.

"As you may know, Moss," he said very tentatively, "my decision on the cutback in the Time and Motion Group must be submitted to Mr. Conner by noon today. However, it's a decision I haven't yet reached. If you have something to say in your own behalf, or any information which might have some direct bearing on my decision, please feel free to speak up."

"Yes, sir." Moss cleared his



throat. "Well, first of all, I feel Mr. Fothergill ought to be retained. Aside from the fact that he is just nine years from retirement, I have it from his mouth personally, that he intends to do something about his gambling problem, which indirectly has caused some strain on his marriage."

"Gambling problem?" Marchbank said. He began stroking his chin again. "I wasn't aware Jesse Fothergill had a gambling problem. His wages have never been garnisheed and no one outside the company has spoken to me about it."

"He's done his best to cover it up, sir. And his sessions with Dr. Penrod have done wonders."

"A psychiatrist?"

"Of course, his two boys are

away at college and they know nothing of any of this."

"Yes, I hope not."

"And he's doing his very best to re-weave the fabric of his marriage. For instance, he's cut his drinking down to a level which is really very tolerable, at least for a man who was formerly such a heavy secret imbiber as Jesse Fothergill."

Marchbank hummed softly and made a brief note on a pad. "And the psychiatrist. What did you say his name was?"

"Dr. Penrod. Morgan Penrod. I understand he's transferred his practice to Europe, but that was long after Jesse was well on the road to a satisfactory recovery."

"And is he seeing a psychiatrist now?" Marchbank asked.

"He may very well be, sir. Of course, Jesse has been keeping to himself a lot lately, so I really don't know for sure. All I really wanted to say is that Jesse has a lot to lose in this cutback, while a young Time and Motion man like myself would have little

trouble latching on with another company."

Marchbank made a few more short notes, then looked up. "Is there anything else, Moss?"

"No, sir. I think that's about all."

"You can go back to work, then, Moss. Your remarks will be taken under advisement."

"Yes, sir."

An hour passed. Claude Moss was at his desk assembling a batch of old time studies on job performances of the now-cancelled project when he heard the explosion.

It seemed to Moss that the sound had come from just next door, from Jesse Fothergill's office. That was really the only safe and sure way to play it, he thought to himself as he started for his office door to have a look. Two stories, after all, didn't exactly represent a decisive, clear-cut management decision. And Jesse Fothergill had always been good management material.

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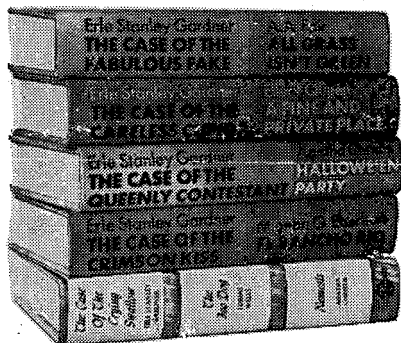
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